

**Searching for the subject:
new narratives through installation.**

by

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Signed statement of originality

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Abstract

This project has visually explored the relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity. Its conceptual foundations have been developed through an engagement with post-structural theory, literature and personal experience. Its visual language has been formed by adopting aspects of Nicolas Bourriaud's theories of postproduction and relational aesthetics in tandem with early conceptual art's aesthetic of administration.

The result of the project is a series of installations that focus on viewer experience and offer the possibility of developing *new narratives* about our relationship to language and knowledge. The installations incorporate already existing materials, cultural signs, objects and ideas associated with institutional practices of collecting, manipulating and disseminating information. The familiar language of bureaucracy has thus been used to create a network of seemingly interconnected scenarios that engage the viewer in the shifting roles of protagonist, subject, witness or voyeur. A sense of uncertainty and confusion is produced, evoking the idea of a fractured subjectivity in a state of limbo, a condition in which meaning is gained only through attempting to piece together the different narratives on offer. The nature of our relationship to language and knowledge is thus evoked through physical and psychological interaction as well as visual engagement with the work.

The project's concern with language, knowledge and information systems harks back to the conceptual art movement of the 1960s and to contemporary art's accompanying engagement with philosophy, in particular post-structuralism. Within this context, it has re-visited and re-assessed ideas about the role of language in defining contemporary subjectivity and has explored strategies for conveying

those ideas through installation. From Kosuth to the Kabakovs, it references a broad spectrum of artists who have investigated related themes using an almost uncategorisable array of non-traditional materials, styles and strategies.

The project has concluded that we are fragmented subjects in a state of limbo, our relationship to language and knowledge characterised by paradox, anxiety, complicity and challenge - and a continued search for meaning and wholeness despite their seeming absence. Ultimately, it has presented the viewer with an opening: a new network of possible narratives about language, knowledge and self. Although these narratives appear to be linked, they fail to come to a neat conclusion. Just as contemporary subjectivity is in a state of limbo, so too, are the scenarios depicted in the installations.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Romans Ozolins, 1924-1986, who was always searching for the subject and whose library was my introduction to the world.

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INTRODUCTION

This exegesis is divided into three main chapters and a conclusion.

Part one provides an overview of the central argument. It introduces the subject matter - the visual exploration of the relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity - and identifies associated fields in contemporary art practice. The conceptual and formal challenges associated with adding to the field are identified and the outcomes summarised. This chapter also provides an overview of the personal motivation driving the research, an outline of the project's parameters and a glossary of frequently used terms.

Part two, which is divided into two broad areas of discussion, addresses the context of the project in detail. The first half explores the legacy of the 1960s and the project's relationship to early conceptual art, anti-modernist strategies and post-structural thinking. The logic of installation is discussed along with Bourriaud's theories of postproduction and relational aesthetics - the main strategies that were used to resolve the project. The second half of the chapter explores how four key features of the relationship between language, knowledge and subjectivity have been reflected in theory, literature, and philosophy. It then discusses the ways in which these features have been visually explored by various artists from the 1960s onwards and identifies how this project has added to that field.

Part three discusses how the project was pursued. It is divided into three phases of progress. The early phase is experimental - problems are identified but clear strategies for tackling them have not yet developed. This phase focuses on the book as the principal visual motif for exploring the links between language, knowledge and subjectivity. Phase two discusses key turning points that

affected the overall strategic and conceptual direction of the project. These include a six month period overseas and the creation of work for an exhibition that focussed on self-portraiture. Phase three relates the outcomes of those turning points - the adoption of elements of postproduction, relational aesthetics and an aesthetic of administration and bureaucracy - and how they were used to resolve the project. The submitted work is discussed in detail and other art work relevant to the project is outlined.

The final chapter provides a conclusion, summarising how the project has explored the relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity and how those explorations have added to the field.

PART ONE: THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

The subject matter

The only thing we know at the moment, in all certainty, is that in Western culture the being of man and the being of language have never, at any time, been able to coexist and to articulate themselves one upon the other. Their incompatibility has been one of the fundamental features of our thought.¹

This project has aimed to visually explore the cultural construction of subjectivity through language. In particular, I have been interested in the paradoxical nature of our relationship to the system of sounds, marks or gestures that communicate thought and enable us to convey information and knowledge to each other.² The essential paradox, which is grounded in post-structural theory, is that our sense of self - our subjectivity - is both shaped and restricted by language.³ On the one hand, language enables us to share our ideas and perceptions about the world we live in; on the other, it is not an accurate reflection of reality. What I say to you does not necessarily reflect my true intentions (I may mean what I say but I may not necessarily say what I mean) and, of course, what I read in the newspaper or a history book may not necessarily tell me how it really was.

The term language requires some clarification. The project certainly refers, in a very literal sense, to the written and spoken word; however, its interest in language as a system of communication and

¹ Foucault, Michel, *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences*, Bristol, Great Britain: Routledge, 1970, p 339

² Kristeva, Julia, *Language: the unknown, an initiation into linguistics*. (Translated by Anne M Menke) London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, p 6

³ The term subjectivity refers to one's individual sense of self as constituted through conscious and unconscious thoughts, reactions and emotions. It is used interchangeably throughout the exegesis with the terms subject, individual and self.

signification is much broader - it sees language as the structural foundation of society and culture. The submitted work thus incorporates materials, words, mark-making, symbols and images associated with a range of languages, including science, bureaucracy, fiction and academia. The project is not just about words, but a range of symbolic systems that enable us to transmit, record and organise knowledge and information.

The topic's concern with language, philosophy and the perceived gap between the word and the world is not new. It harks back to the conceptual art movement of the 1960s and to contemporary art's accompanying engagement with language-based philosophies - in particular post-structuralism - which endured until the early 1990s. Conceptual art was characterised by a range of anti-modernist attitudes and strategies, including the dominance of intellectual engagement over visual aesthetics, a focus on content and process rather than the finished art object, and what Buchloh refers to as an 'aesthetic of administration', which was often reflected in the use of language-based and archival materials.⁴ Within this context, the project has re-visited and re-assessed ideas about the role of language in defining contemporary subjectivity and has explored strategies to convey those ideas through installation.

The project raises a number of core philosophical questions central to an understanding of self and language: How can we know ourselves through the structures of language and recorded data or information, if those structures do not reflect what is considered to be authentic or true? What is the relationship between one's

⁴ Buchloh, Benjamin, 'Conceptual art 1962-1969: from the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions', in *October*, Winter, 1990, p 199. Buchloh's aesthetic of administration, which is discussed in the chapter on context, does not necessarily always imply the use of language-based materials. Buchloh also uses the term to describe the minimal conceptual strategies of Buren and Haacke, which use existing materials that bear no mark of the individual maker.

subjective sense of self and the information we have, as a civilization, accumulated about being human? What does that information reflect and what sort of understanding does it provide about what I am, how I am, and what my place is in the world? What is the relationship between the individual and the social systems and discourses that support that information?

In attempting to address these questions and formulate a view of contemporary subjectivity, the research has been informed by an aggregate of post-structural thinking, literature and personal experience. In terms of post-structuralism, Foucault has been of particular significance.⁵ However, I have not aimed to illustrate Foucauldian or any other theory. I have been equally engaged with writers of fiction, specifically Kafka, Flanagan, Auster, Banville and Orwell, whose novels have explored a range of conflicting relationships between individual and society. Anna Funder's *Stasiland*, an account of how the secret police operated in the former East Germany, has also played an important role in the final resolution of the project. In addition, the research has a subjective context, based on my personal experiences of growing up in a multilingual family.

The picture I have drawn of contemporary subjectivity as expressed through language and knowledge concurs with many aspects of post-structuralism and has been reinforced by powerful narratives in fiction and non-fiction. I agree that the contemporary subject is both constructed and fractured through a web of language games, discourses and power relations - and that it is burdened by the inescapable weight and legacy of an uncertain past. I also agree that knowledge and truth, rather than setting the subject free, are contingent and elusive, implying that any search for meaning

⁵ The debatable relevance of French theory to contemporary art practice is addressed in the chapter on Context.

becomes an almost meaningless task. Our relationship to language and knowledge is thus underpinned by paradox and anxiety. And yet it is also characterised by a sense of lure, mystery and challenge. We are subjects in limbo, caught somewhere between - and perhaps beyond - a humanist yearning for wholeness and a post-modern fear of meaninglessness and loss of self. Although we are shaped and restricted by the discourses and institutions that structure our lives, those discourses and institutions are constructions of our own making. In order to understand ourselves - and thus transform ourselves from subjects in limbo to subjects with direction - we are driven to investigate how those structures operate. We are compelled to find meaning and order despite their seeming absence. The project's inner momentum is driven by this underlying sense of searching and enquiry - the desire to understand the story of how the self has come to be.

Despite the conclusions I have drawn, the project has not aimed to present a definitive or didactic picture of the contemporary subject. Rather, it has been driven by the need to explore *how* contemporary subjectivity is constructed through language and knowledge. The focus then, has been on making work that evokes an atmosphere of searching and enquiry, engaging and challenging viewers in such a way that they may raise their own questions and come to their own conclusions about their relationships to language and knowledge.

During the process of experimentation with a range of visual strategies, four core issues began to recur and became the central concerns of the submitted work. Discussed in detail in the chapter on Context, they are summarised as follows:

Language does not mirror reality. Our perception of the world and our sense of self within it is *constructed* rather than *reflected* through language. And, since language is based on an arbitrary system of signs and signifiers, our relationship to it and our

understanding of the self is necessarily paradoxical and incomplete. Language thus both promises and denies meaning.

The subject is in limbo. Unable to completely abandon the idea of an essential core of being, the subject is caught somewhere between a humanist sense of unity and a post-modern anxiety and fragmentation. It is thus compelled to seek wholeness and meaning despite their seeming absence.

The subject is complicit. Language, knowledge and the institutions that are the custodians of that knowledge, are structures of our own making. In order to understand ourselves, we are compelled to investigate how those structures operate.

Meaning is a network of incompleteness. The relationship between language, knowledge and subjectivity is an open-ended narrative. Like the self, meaning is a series of interconnected possibilities - there is no closure.

These issues are all interconnected and stem from the post-structural premise that the word and the world are not one. The project also references a number of other themes, such as surveillance, power, 'intelligence' and bureaucracy; however, all of these can all be related back to the four central ideas listed above.

The field: challenges and outcomes

The conceptual concerns of the project raised a number of formal and technical challenges. How is it possible to visually convey the philosophical underpinnings of the project? How can our relationship to language and to knowledge be visually realised in

such a way that its paradoxical and complex nature becomes evident? What strategies can be employed to engage viewers with the types of questions the project has raised and the conclusions it has drawn?

In seeking to address these questions, the project has located its central context. Its concern with both language and philosophy links it back to the conceptual art movement of the 1960s, which is inextricably connected to an anti-modernist sensibility and the influences of post-modern and post-structural thinking.⁶ Conceptual art was searching for new modes of artistic expression in a desire to question, challenge and disrupt the social and cultural institutions associated with a modernist view of the world. The range of strategies, styles and materials employed is so diverse that it is difficult to categorise. However, critics such as Newman, Bird and Buchloh agree that conceptual art does share certain broad characteristics. These include an engagement with language-based philosophies and a resultant focus on language as art; a privileging of intellectual over visual engagement; a focus on content and process instead of form, and a shift away from the art object and the artist as bearers of meaning to the viewer as creator of meaning. In addition, early conceptual art in particular, often employed archival or language-based materials, which evoked an aesthetic associated with administration and bureaucracy. The overall result was a move away from the more traditional disciplines of sculpture and painting to experimentation with installation, site-specific work and performance.

This project does not, of course, share the same political agenda as early conceptual art. It is not concerned with challenging modernism or demonstrating that language can be art. However, a

⁶ I also acknowledge that the project's concern with the impact of language on subjectivity connects it to aspects of the Surrealist art movement; however, conceptual art has remained the central context.

number of conceptual art's formal strategies have been significant to the development of the project: the use of language-based materials and the associated aesthetic of administration; the experimentation with a diverse range of materials and styles, in particular installation, and the emphasis on the viewer rather than the art object as bearer of meaning.

More specifically, I have turned to the work of a range of artists from the 1960s onwards who have used strategies related to those mentioned above to explore the way in which subjectivity is culturally constructed through language and/or knowledge. These range from deceptively simple text-based works that privilege intellectual over visual engagement, such as the early work of Joseph Kosuth, to highly complex installations that tease the relationship between reality and fiction and offer the viewer a 'total' experience, such as the installations of the Kabakovs. Other significant artists include Mark Wallinger, Michael Landy, Mike Nelson, Bruce Nauman, Lyndal Jones, Ann Hamilton and Christian Boltanski. In order to add to this field and convey its particular view of contemporary subjectivity, I have experimented with two main strategies.

Firstly, I have developed a visual language using Nicholas Bourriaud's theory of postproduction in combination with early conceptual art's aesthetic of administration, which references information systems, bureaucracy and the archive. While certain objects incorporated into this visual language have been re-created and images have been manipulated, the focus has not been on imbuing these individually with essential meaning about our relationship to language and to knowledge. Rather, I have created a series of installations that re-configure and re-present already existing materials, cultural signs, objects and ideas associated with the storage, manipulation and dissemination of knowledge and information. Viewers are thus offered the possibility of developing

new relationships and *new narratives* about materials and forms that are already known to them. The familiar has thus been used to disrupt existing ideas about language and knowledge.

Secondly, I have focussed on offering the viewer an experiential relationship with the work that is physical, psychological and intellectual. Installation has made this possible through its inherent flexibility, its anticipation of the viewer to complete the work and its connection to theatre. Using existing materials and forms, a network of seemingly interconnected scenarios has been constructed, offering the viewer a range of experiences about our relationship to language and knowledge. The viewer moves from one scenario to another, engaging in roles that range from protagonist to subject to witness to voyeur. A sense of uncertainty and confusion is created, evoking the idea of a fractured subjectivity in a state of limbo, a condition in which meaning is gained only through attempting to piece together the different experiences on offer. The paradoxical nature of our relationship to language and to knowledge, and the drive to search for meaning and wholeness despite their seeming absence, are thus evoked through an *experiential* relationship, the memory of which may endure beyond the physical encounter with the work.

Ultimately, the viewer is presented with an opening: a new network of possibilities for interacting with and understanding already familiar cultural narratives of the self. Clues that imply a link between these narratives are offered, but while such clues may encourage investigation and promise closure, they fail to come to a neat conclusion. Just as contemporary subjectivity is in a state of limbo, so too, are the scenarios depicted in the installations.

Although the final outcome of the project was resolved through a combination of postproduction, relational aesthetics and installation strategies, in the early stages of the research, the approach was much

broader and involved experiments and ideas that incorporated a range of working methods, including digital printing, site-specific work and performance. This early work was particularly centred on the book as a visual motif and also included handwriting, text and found images. Although this work effectively conveyed some aspects of the paradoxical nature of our relationship to language and knowledge, the atmosphere and aesthetics evoked by a focus on the book were dominated by a sense of comfort - and perhaps even reverence - rather than of challenge. In order to evoke the idea of a fragmented subject searching for meaning, the viewers' physical and psychological comfort zone had to be disrupted, which, in turn, might disrupt their ideas about language and knowledge. This was resolved by shifting to an aesthetic of administration and bureaucracy; the adoption of a wider range of materials and cultural signs associated with language and information systems, and a clearer focus on installation and viewer participation. The shift from a 'library' aesthetic to a more bureaucratic one was also accompanied by a shift in the *types* of language and knowledge the work was referencing. While the submitted work often alludes to the language of 'information' or even 'intelligence', the earlier work is more strongly associated with the language of 'wisdom' and 'academia'. Ultimately, these distinctions are minor - what has mattered most is that all language, and all types of information conveyed through language, represent discourses of our own making.

Parameters of the project

The project has taken a fairly broad social perspective on the relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity. However, it is also defined by clear parameters, some of which have already been mentioned.

Although the project references many aspects of early conceptual art's engagement with language and philosophy, unlike the Art and Language group it is not concerned with the linguistic structure of art or with demonstrating that language can be art. And, while the submitted work has adopted an institutional aesthetic, incorporating documents, books, computers, files and office equipment, it is not specifically concerned with the impact of new technology on information storage and access, or with issues about the book versus the computer.

The project acknowledges the considerable impact of post-structuralism on feminist theories of identity; however it is not concerned with the patriarchal structure of language or a psychoanalytic view of the subject. Leading on from this, while the research has been informed by particular philosophical views, it has never set out to illustrate philosophy or demonstrate philosophical expertise in Foucauldian or other concepts. Rather, the aim has been to merge relevant aspects of post-structural thinking with literary, personal and other references in order to explore the relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity in a broad social and political context.

Most importantly, the project does not aim to be didactic. It has reached certain conclusions about the nature of contemporary subjectivity as expressed through language and knowledge, but one of its principle concerns has been to create an atmosphere that encourages a desire to question and search.

Motivation: Why make work about these ideas?

...it became my life's most sacred desire to expose that the Word & the World were no longer what they seemed, that they were no longer one. ⁷

The project's inner momentum is driven by two interconnected motivations. The first is subjective and is concerned with wanting to explore and understand the impact of language and knowledge on my own sense of identity. The second is concerned with making the personal relevant in a broader social context.

My fascination with language stems from growing up in a bilingual family in which Latvian was spoken at home and English in public. From a very early age it seemed clear to me that each of these languages was accompanied by a different way of behaving and communicating in the world. Sometimes those worlds crossed, but most of the time they ran oddly parallel to each other. It was the written word, however, that had the most powerful impact on me. My father's ever-expanding library was a constant source of fascination. It was my threshold into the mysteries of the world and before I could read, the promise of the secrets contained within his books - written in Latvian, English, French, German and Ancient Greek - was a constant lure. I longed for the day that I, too, would be able to decode the indecipherable text that filled the seemingly endless pages of his library. Sometimes, I would sit and stare at specific pages for long periods of time, naively hoping that the intensity of my gaze could will the meaning to emerge.

When eventually I was able to read, I was overwhelmed, excited - sometimes even alarmed - by the worlds introduced to me through the words of Virginia Woolf, Jack Kerouac, Henry Miller, Evelyn Waugh, Nabakov, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky... Like Borges' Library of

⁷ Flanagan, Richard, *Gould's book of fish: a novel in 12 fish*, Sydney: Picador, Pan MacMillan, 2001, p39

Babel, the universe itself seemed contained within my father's books.

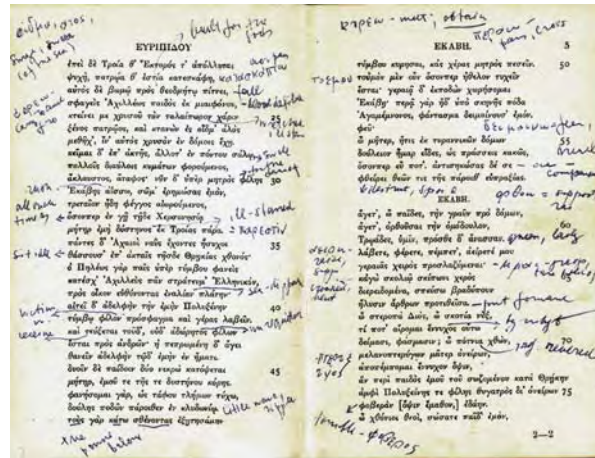


Figure 1: Pages from one of my father's books

But even though my father's library opened the world to me, I was also aware that my relationship to language and the knowledge it conveyed was a paradoxical one. I was both lured and amazed by the power of the word and the book to communicate ideas and information, but I was also highly conscious of a gap that existed between my sense of self, the words that I spoke and the words I read in books. It didn't matter whether it was Latvian or English, language failed in some inexplicable way to capture my inner, subjective sense of being.

Foucault acknowledged this paradox when writing about the modern *cogito*:

For can I, in fact, say that I am this language I speak, into which my thought insinuates itself to the point of finding in it the system of all its own possibilities, yet which exists only in the weight of sedimentations my thought will never be capable of actualizing altogether? ... Can I say that I am this life I sense deep within me...? I can say, equally well, that I am and that I am not all this; the *cogito* does not lead to an affirmation of being, but it does lead to a whole series of questions concerned with being:

What must I be, I who think and who am my thought, in order to be what I do not think, in order for my thought to be what I am not? ⁸

It is a long quote, but it does exemplify the core premise of my personal motivation to pursue an investigation in the relationships between language, knowledge and subjective experience. Foucault implies that the very stuff of self seems embedded - entrapped - within language, yet at the same time, he alludes to an unsaid, unsayable existence, that lies beyond language and the thought that is only made possible through language. Foucault tells us that there is no essential self (*the cogito does not lead to an affirmation of being*) but he also refers to the gap between word and world. It is the awareness of this gap that has fuelled the project's inner momentum. I have wanted to evoke some sense of the paradoxes inherent in my personal relationship to language: the way I feel that it has both defined who I am and failed to capture my inner experience of self; the way it has shown me the world but also left me wanting; the way it is both a lure and a mystery. As the project progressed, and I came to the conclusion that these experiences are symptomatic of not being able to let go of a humanist idea of self, the need to evoke a sense of anxiety and uncertainty became equally important to the research.

But in addition to this personal motivation, the research is driven by broader concerns that make the project relevant in a wider context. Language is an undeniably significant aspect of being human. It is through language - be it written, spoken, marked or gestured - that thought and social communication are possible. An enquiry into language and the transfer of information and knowledge made possible through it, thus enables us to understand more about ourselves and how we fit into the world. Kristeva observed that 'one of the most striking characteristics of our era' is the focus on the study of language as the 'key' to understanding man and the laws

⁸ Foucault, Michel, *The order of things*. London: Routledge, 1970, p 324-5

that govern social functioning and history.⁹ Lyotard argues that the leading sciences and technologies of the twentieth century have all focussed on some aspect of language, citing linguistics, phonology, cybernetics, computer languages, telematics and paradoxology, among others, as examples.¹⁰ And language and knowledge theories have continued to play a crucial role in a range of academic fields, including philosophy, science, psychology, sociology, history, feminism and cultural studies. The project's underlying impetus is thus a synthesis of my personal experiences and the broader social relevance of language and knowledge systems in our lives.

Summary

This project has combined a range of interconnected approaches in its aim to visually explore the paradoxical relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity. It has turned to post-structural theory, literature and personal experience in order to form its own picture of how language impacts on the construction of the contemporary subject. It has adopted elements from Bourriaud's theories of relational aesthetics and postproduction in conjunction with an aesthetic of administration to convey its ideas and add to the existing field of art practice. The field consists of a broad spectrum of artists who have explored different aspects of our relationship to language and knowledge from the 1960s onwards using a wide range of non-traditional materials, styles and strategies.

⁹ Kristeva, Julia, *Language, the unknown: an initiation into linguistics*. (trans. by Anne M Menke), London: Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1989, p 3

¹⁰ Lyotard, Jean-Francois, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*. (trans by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p 3-4

The submitted work has focussed on viewer engagement and the use of existing materials and styles to offer a series of *experiences* about the paradoxical nature of our relationship to language and knowledge. The adoption of an aesthetic of administration and bureaucracy has facilitated the creation of an atmosphere of searching, enquiry, tension and challenge. Viewers' ideas about language and knowledge are thus more likely to be disrupted.

Glossary

This glossary provides definitions of essential terms used frequently throughout the exegesis. It also indicates how these terms are referenced in the submitted work.

Language: a system of sounds, marks or gestures that communicate thought and are the basis of social communication.¹¹ In the submission, symbolically referenced through documents, books, words, images such as black holes, EEG and other data, and sound.

Knowledge: perspectives, ideas, laws, narratives, definitions and principles produced and upheld by disciplines and institutions.¹² Referenced in the submission in the same way as language.

Information: the communication or reception of knowledge or intelligence.¹³ Referenced in the same way as language and knowledge.

Subjectivity: a post-structural term for identity, self or the subject as culturally constructed through discourses, ideologies and institutional practices.¹⁴ Referenced and inferred through images, words, documents, collected data and sound, through the absence or presence of the viewer and through the various roles the viewer may engage in within the installations.

¹¹ Based on Kristeva's definition of language. Kristeva, Julia, *Language, the unknown: an initiation into linguistics*. (trans. by Anne M Menke), London: Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1989, p 6

¹² Based on Danaher, Schirato and Webb's summary of Foucault's definition. Danaher, Geoff, Schirato, Tony and Webb, Jen, *Understanding Foucault*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2000, p xiii

¹³ *Webster's third new international dictionary (unabridged)*. Springfield: Massachusetts, ©1993, p 1160

¹⁴ Based on Danaher, Schirato and Webb's summary, 2000, p xiv-xv

Discourse: a particular type of language associated with the practices, disciplines and ideas of an institution. Referenced in the same way as language, knowledge and information.

Truth: knowledge that has been endorsed by disciplines and institutions. Referenced in the submission through absence, obscurity and uncertainty.

Power: a changing network of often complex relationships between social and cultural groups, areas of society, institutions and disciplines. Inferred in the submission through the experiences of being watched and of watching.

Institution: a set of public or private relationships established between individuals and specific principles and practices, eg marriage, the law, education; institutions are often associated with particular objects and buildings. While the exact function of the institution referenced in the submission is unknown, it is identified through the logo *SECURE CONTENT*.

PART TWO: CONTEXT

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first establishes the project's links with the conceptual art movement as well as with aspects of Nicolas Bourriaud's theories of postproduction and relational aesthetics. It also discusses the logic of adopting installation as a strategy for realising the submitted work and provides an overview of the project's engagement with post structural thinking. The second section is much more specific and focuses on the core philosophical issues the project has aimed to convey, thematically exploring these through theory, literature and works of art.

Conceptual art and the legacy of the 1960s

The project's concern with language and philosophy harks back to the conceptual art movement of the 1960s and to associated anti-modernist art practices such as installation, text-based work, performance and site-specific art. The use of these alternative art strategies coincided with dramatic changes in thinking about the nature of language, knowledge, culture, power, truth and the construction of identity. The new post-modern outlook challenged and deconstructed the grand narratives that belonged to a humanist view of the world and acknowledged, through structuralism and post-structuralism, that language was the primary site where identity, meaning and the social and cultural fabric of the world are constructed. While structuralism showed that meaning was relational, based on deep underlying linguistic relationships

reflected in culture and society, post-structuralism demonstrated that those relationships were arbitrarily constructed. Meaning, truth and identity were thus exposed as unreliable, contingent and illusionary. This post-structural view of the world had a dramatic impact on the visual arts - not just because it challenged the social and cultural institutions that provide meaning in our lives, but also because it challenged the whole system of representation on which art was based. The conceptual art movement addressed both issues. It questioned the social and cultural structures that supposedly provided meaning in our lives, and it experimented with new art forms such as installation and site-specificity, challenging ideas about what art could be and how it should be experienced, as well as undermining the institutional structures of museums, galleries and art schools.

Of course, conceptual art did not emerge in isolation. It harks back to a number of other art movements that were equally concerned with challenging the institutions of art, including Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus, the Lettristes, the Situationist International, Minimalism and the happenings and events associated with Pop Art. In particular, I acknowledge the legacy of the Duchampian ready-made, which challenges ideas about authenticity and authorship through the use of existing objects; Surrealism's use of language as a catalyst for both evoking different ways of perceiving the world and for exploring the arbitrary and ambiguous relationships between word and image; the Situationist strategy of *détournement*, which involved the re-use of existing cultural forms to negate their original meaning, and the theatricality of Pop Art happenings and events, which challenged the viewer to engage with the work experientially. However, my principal focus has been on work produced from the mid to late 1960s onwards.

Aspects of the relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity have been explored by a diverse range of artists

associated with conceptual art using an equally diverse range of non-traditional approaches. However, defining this field has been inherently difficult for two main reasons. Firstly, because conceptual practice lacks medium specificity, incorporating an almost unlimited range of materials, styles and strategies, it is extremely problematic to categorise. Secondly, there is no cohesive theoretical model for conceptual art, its history marked by division and at times, professional conflict.

Newman and Bird offer a broad set of characteristics that reflect the general philosophical underpinnings of early conceptual art. They list a change in emphasis from viewer to object, '*the privileging of language or language-like systems over pure visibility*', a critical attitude towards the institutions of the art world, a questioning of the social responsibilities of the artist, and a general shift from artist and artwork as creators of meaning to the viewer as ultimate constructor of meaning.¹ They also provide a useful chronological framework for tracing certain tendencies in conceptual art's development over the last thirty to forty years, which has helped locate this project's relationship to the movement.

The first phase of conceptual art identified by Newman and Bird, which extends from the 1960s into the 1970s, saw the beginnings of an intense engagement with semiotics, post-structuralism and the linguistic properties of art. Much of the work associated with this period was concerned with decoding representation and demonstrating that language itself could be art. It often employed the strategy of juxtaposing image with word, as exemplified in Joseph Kosuth's, *One and three chairs*, 1965, as well as the frequent use of materials and references associated with language-based or

¹ Newman, Michael and Bird, Jon (eds), *Rewriting conceptual art*: London: Reaktion Books, 1999, p 6

information systems, as in On Kawara's date paintings and books, Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-9, and Joseph Kosuth's *The ninth investigation*, 1972.

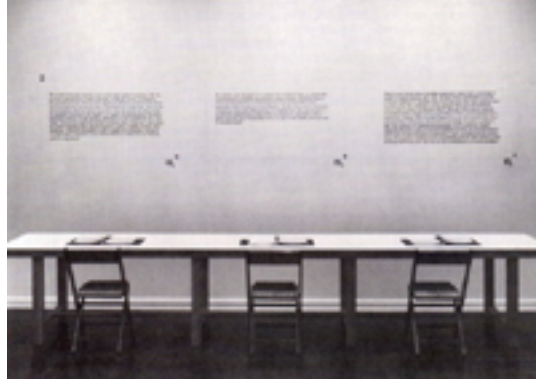


Figure 1: Joseph Kosuth, *The ninth investigation* (Art as idea as idea), 1972

This first phase placed new and challenging demands on the viewer, inviting intellectual engagement through the shock of its anti-modernist tactics. However, as Peter Osborne points out, early conceptual art was far from cohesive. He distinguishes two broad conceptual approaches. The hardline, exclusive conceptualism associated with Joseph Kosuth and Art and Language, was more intently focussed on demonstrating that philosophy could be a new type of art and on attacking the art object as 'the site of a look'.² The more open, inclusive practices of artists such as Adrian Piper and Sol Lewitt, were interested in art as a branch of philosophy and less concerned with the dematerialisation of the art object.³ The situation is further complicated by the eventual split between Kosuth and Art and Language, Kosuth accused of the continued production

² Osborne, Peter, 'Conceptual art and/as philosophy', in Newman, Michael and Bird, Jon (eds), *Rewriting conceptual art*: London: Reaktion Books, 1999, p 48

³ Ibid. Peter Osborne's essay provides an insightful analysis of the complex and often paradoxical relationship between conceptual art and philosophy.

of object-based works that were becoming increasingly recognised for their own brand of visual aesthetic.⁴



Figure 2: Adrian Piper, *Catalysis III*, 1970

This project has been informed by both hardline and inclusive approaches to conceptual art. While I have engaged with post-structural philosophy and have adopted an aesthetic that borrows from Kosuthian conceptualism, I have no need to demonstrate that language can be art or that art can be philosophy. Nor have I been interested in the complex and esoteric devices of Art and Language, which were so intently concerned with privileging intellectual engagement that the visual was almost denied. Hardline conceptual art also tended to disregard the subject in its emphasis on language based systems of representation, whereas I have turned to the subject as a principle concern. My exploration of the relationship between language and subjectivity has been achieved by melding hardline and inclusive approaches. I have adopted elements from the spare and almost clinical style of Kosuth's work to evoke a strong sense of an absent subject, while also engaging the viewer in such a way that they *become* the subject. I have been particularly

⁴ Ibid, p 62

interested in how a hardline, 'objective' approach can be used in combination with other strategies to evoke powerful subjective experiences for the viewer.

Buchloh offers further insight into the hardline approach. His 1990 assessment of conceptual art in *October* magazine, which scathingly attacks Joseph Kosuth for perpetuating the modernist legacy and Marcel Broodthaers for transforming conceptual art into a farce, argues that conceptual art is distinguished from its predecessors, such as the Pop movement, through its adoption of an aesthetic of administration, as opposed to one of industrialisation:

... Conceptual Art came to displace even that image of the mass-produced object and its aestheticised forms in Pop Art, replacing an aesthetic of industrial production and consumption with an aesthetic of administration and legal organisation and institutional validation.⁵

Buchloh states that as it was not possible to judge a conceptual art work by its '(artistic) manual competence', it was judged instead by an aesthetic based on legalistic convention and institutional discourse, countering the tradition of an aesthetic based on taste and connoisseurship.⁶ He traces the foundations of this aesthetic back to Duchamp and the ready-made. Thus, when Duchamp signed the urinal and Piero Manzoni signed a naked model's body, they affirmed the 'legal' status of those 'objects' as artworks. He further adds that the aesthetic of administration parallels the social functioning of the postwar middle class, which *administers* labour and manufacture rather than producing goods.⁷ Thus conceptual

⁵ Buchloh, Benjamin, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: from the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions', in *October*, Winter, 1990, p 119.

⁶ Ibid, p 117-8

⁷ Ibid, p 128-9

art, rather than creating that which is completely new, is associated with the use and re-presentation of existing products and strategies. (This is very similar to Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of postproduction, which is discussed further on.) Buchloh sees the evidence of an aesthetic of administration in such projects as the early book work of Edward Ruscha, which uses architectural referents, unmanipulated 'deadpan' photography sourced from the mass media and commercial book production,⁸ as well as the minimal, reductionist works of Hans Haacke and Daniel Buren. He argues that such work offers a successful critique both of the art world and the institutional structures of late capitalism. It not only challenges modernist visual aesthetics but it completely purges the work of 'imaginary and bodily experience' as well as effacing 'all residues of representation and style, of individuality and skill'.⁹ This is where my particular interest in Buchloh's argument lies. While such early conceptual art used an aesthetic of administration to deny both the idea of the individual subject and subjective engagement with the work, I have adopted a similar strategy to effect the opposite. The submitted work facilitates the experiential and the imaginary despite the use of materials and forms that evoke an overtly institutional, pre-produced and bureaucratic atmosphere. The legacy of an aesthetic of administration¹⁰ is evident in contemporary conceptual projects such as Liam Gillick's *Wood Way*, 2003, which uses text in combination with minimal architectural structures, and Michael Landy's inventory of 7,227 possessions,

⁸ Ibid, p 121-122

⁹ Ibid, p 143

¹⁰ Buchloh ultimately assesses conceptual art as a short-lived success because it was eventually absorbed into the art world it so vehemently attempted to challenge. Of course, this project disagrees with his final analysis - the legacy of the conceptual art movement is alive and well, and while it may not always challenge perceptions about what art can be, it does continue to challenge ideas about how we interact with art.

which were systematically destroyed in the performance *Breakdown*, 2001.



Figure 3: Liam Gillick, *Wood way*, 2002

The second phase of conceptual art Newman and Bird identify belongs to the 1980s and was marked by an increasing demand for art as a capitalist commodity and the gradual absorption of conceptual art into the institutions of the art world. Newman and Bird associate this phase with work that tended to focus on issues concerned with originality, replication and simulation. It moved away from an aesthetic associated with administration and employed strategies more strongly associated with the media and popular culture, such as Jenny Holzer's truisms which appeared on T-shirts as well as flashing signs on buildings, and the distinctive black, red and white billboard work of Barbara Kruger. Such work also demonstrates a greater emphasis on the cultural and social construction of subjectivity. While this project has been informed by the hypnotic quality of Holzer's use of flashing text, it has also been interested in work from the 1980s that explores identity from a less media-driven perspective.

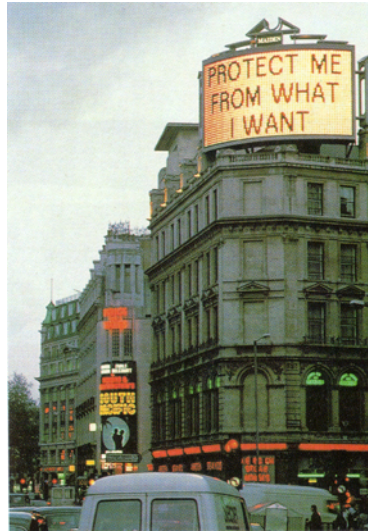


Figure 4, Jenny Holzer, Protect me from what I want, 1988

Christian Boltanski's stacked archival boxes and Lyndal Jones' ten year prediction performances have evoked aspects of our relationship to language and knowledge using strategies associated with repetition, ritual, the layering of visual and aural motifs and performance.

The third phase of conceptual art began in the early 1990s and continues until the present. Newman and Bird, like Godfrey, acknowledge that conceptual practice now dominates the art world, fully embraced both by the institutions of art and the capitalist market. Artists producing work under the umbrella of contemporary conceptual practice include Douglas Gordon, Liam Gillick, Mark Dion, Gabriel Orozco, Tracy Emin, Angela Bulloch and Damien Hirst. Their practice is highly diverse and frequently technologically sophisticated. It has abandoned early conceptual art's original political agenda for a more intense interest in viewer experience, autobiographical themes, subjectivity, and global issues concerned with nomadism and anthropology. Newman and Bird suggest that this third phase is further distinguished from early conceptual practice by clearer internal distinctions between, for example, analytic conceptual art and performative or self-reflexive approaches. However, they also suggest that the newer forms of

conceptual practice have turned away from the hardline tactics of artists such as Joseph Kosuth, and tend to be influenced by the more inclusive approaches of artists such as Dan Graham, Sophie Calle, Mona Hatoum, Susan Hiller, Marcel Broodthaers and the lesser known artists of Latin America, Asia and the former Eastern Bloc.¹¹

This third phase is where this project sits contextually, building and expanding on the existing field through its focus on the relationships between language and subjectivity and the adoption of strategies from all phases of the conceptual art movement. However, contrary to Newman and Bird's observation, I have embraced elements from Kosuth's hardline aesthetic and have focussed on melding strategies from both inclusive and exclusive approaches. The contemporary work most significant to the project includes the maze-like corridors and rooms of Mike Nelson, the all-encompassing bureaucratic total installations of the Kabakovs, the minimal and poetic work of Anne Hamilton, the confronting yet ironically droll work of Mark Wallinger, and Michael Landy's penultimate performance, *Breakdown*.



Figure 5: Mike Nelson, *The coral reef*, 2000

The work of these artists is highly diverse, yet also reflects broad underlying similarities. All the artists use installation to convey

¹¹ Newman & Bird, 1999, p 9-10

different ideas about the cultural construction of subjectivity and all of their work indirectly references elements of a post-structural vision of the world.

This project is thus indebted to approaches associated with all the discussed phases and characteristics of the conceptual art movement.

These can be summarised as:

- an emphasis on the ideas motivating the work rather than the creation of representational art objects, resulting in the frequent use of ready-made objects and materials
- the adoption of an aesthetic associated with administration and bureaucracy, which has been achieved through the use of language-based materials and ideas, often used in multiple or serial form
- an emphasis on viewer experience and subjectivity, which has been achieved through the use of installation, intervention and, ironically, an aesthetic associated with administration.

While identifying with these strategies, I am also highly conscious of the discrepancy between the motives that fuelled early conceptual art and those that might be associated with contemporary practice. I have thus struggled with the lack of a cohesive theory capable of explaining conceptual strategies in a way relevant to contemporary practice. In the third phase of the project, I came across Nicolas Bourriaud's theories of postproduction and relational aesthetics, which claimed to provide such a framework.

Strategic approaches: relational aesthetics and postproduction.

Nicolas Bourriaud is a French curator and art critic as well as co-founder of the relatively new annexe of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, a public gallery that focuses on exhibiting experimental contemporary art that emphasises social interaction between viewer, work, artist and gallery. Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics, first published in 1998, attempts to provide a cohesive analysis of contemporary art from the 1990s onwards. His theory of postproduction, published in 2002, offers an extension of his original ideas. While I do not claim that the submitted work falls neatly under Bourriaud's theories, specific elements of his thinking have been significant to the overall development of the research.

Relational aesthetics is based on the idea that we live in a world in which our relationships are increasingly governed by and experienced through, the capitalist market economy. Bourriaud compares society today with Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, where 'human relations are no longer "directly experienced", but start to become blurred in their "spectacular representation"'. He argues that the most burning issue of contemporary art is centred on the question: 'Is it still possible to generate relationships with the world, in a practical field art-history traditionally earmarked for their "representation"?' ¹²

In response to this situation, Bourriaud contends that a stream of contemporary art since the 1990s has focused on a particular type of

¹² Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational aesthetics*, (translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland), [Paris]: Les Presses du reel, 2002, p 9

encounter between the viewer and the work. This encounter is characterised by inter-subjectivity and the frequent use of modest tactics to make small comments about the nature of contemporary life and our relationships within it. In addition, the work is made without a clearly preconceived idea about the nature of relationships it will encourage. Rirkrit Tirvanija's shared meals, in which he cooks and dines with viewers, leaving the remnants of the meal as a trace of the real art experience, and Gillian Wearing's street performances, in which she asks strangers to write their thoughts on paper, provide key examples of relational art. Bourriaud argues that such actions not only provide a real experience for the viewer, but can also become subversive, political strategies because they disrupt expected means of relating to and communicating with one other.

Through its focus on an open-ended encounter between viewer and work, the experiences that result from interacting with relational art are considered more important than the objects or artefacts that make up the work. Unlike early conceptual art, however, relational art is not concerned with the immateriality of objects. Objects may be intrinsic to the work but the *subject* of the work remains the final transaction - the relational gesture.¹³



Figure 6: Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (tomorrow is another day)*, 1996

¹³ Ibid, p 47

Interestingly, Bourriaud is quite adamant that the art produced under relational aesthetics 'in no way draws sustenance from any reinterpretation of Conceptual art in the mid sixties or that past aesthetic movement.'¹⁴ His argument is both unclear and contradictory. On the one hand, he says that many artists who make relational work directly reference conceptual art, fluxus and minimalism, but on the other, denies that such referencing has anything to do with the artist's own thinking or with the ideas underpinning relational aesthetics.¹⁵ This failure to acknowledge conceptual art's contribution to contemporary art practice and relational strategies is unfortunate, especially since Bourriaud happily references the Situationists, who are frequently cited by other critics as precursors to the conceptual movement.

Nevertheless, I have found aspects of Bourriaud's relational theory extremely useful. The final submission incorporates objects, materials and images that have been manipulated with some attention to detail; however, the final objective has not been to focus on these as items for contemplation in their own right. The ultimate aim has been to create environments that encourage viewer interaction and, through that interaction, disrupt and question our relationships to language and knowledge. One of the key strategies the project has used to achieve this aim, is the creation of scenarios that offer the viewer a range of shifting roles that cannot be prescriptively predetermined. The work thus becomes a network of possible relationships that evoke further relationships in the outside world.

¹⁴ Ibid, p 44

¹⁵ Ibid, p 46-48

Bourriaud's theory of postproduction has played a far more dominant role than relational aesthetics in the realisation of this project. It also bears interesting similarities to Buchloh's aesthetic of administration, which is grounded on the idea that early conceptual art's 'visual' language was derived from the concepts of capitalist production and legal administration. However, as will become evident, there are also clear differences between the theories underlying the two strategies.

Postproduction refers to the set of processes associated with piecing together audiovisual materials in the music, film and television industry. These include editing, dubbing, subtitling, voice overs and special effects which, as Bourriaud points out, are processes linked to *tertiary*, as opposed to primary industries such as agriculture which produce raw materials.¹⁶ The distinction is important, because postproduction is essentially concerned with the *re-use* of pre-existing materials, works, ideas, forms and cultural signs to create new ways of interacting with and understanding our relationships to them. It is thus about taking that which is already familiar to make it one's own.¹⁷

The rhizomatic, endlessly open structure of the internet provides the underlying model for postproduced art. In Bourriaud's words, 'the contemporary work of art does not position itself as the termination point of the "creative process" (a finished product to be contemplated) but as a site of navigation, a portal, a generator of activities.'¹⁸ Art that uses postproduction is thus not concerned with providing resolved solutions - instead, it offers the viewer a new

¹⁶ Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002, p 7

¹⁷ Ibid, p 12

¹⁸ Ibid, p 13

network of possible relationships with that which already exists.¹⁹ Bourriaud suggests that the ultimate meaning of the art work is inextricably related to the way in which objects and forms have been used. Use, in turn, is directly linked to interpretation.²⁰

It could be said that postproduction is no different to the postmodern strategies of pastiche and appropriation. However, while the latter use existing cultural forms and signs to expose the way in which meaning is constructed, postproduction, is concerned with creating new meanings and offering alternative pathways through reality. The relationships between postproduction and Buchloh's aesthetic of administration are also evident. But whereas Buchloh argued that an aesthetic of administration denied the individual, promoting an intellectual rather than experiential and subjective engagement with the work,²¹ Bourriaud's theory focuses on the viewer's re-engagement with postproduced materials - it encourages the viewer to reclaim them through interaction.

This project has embraced Bourriaud's strategy of postproduction as a way of re-engaging the viewer with materials and ideas associated with institutional practices of information collection and distribution. Referencing conceptual art's aesthetic of administration, I have created a network of scenarios that borrow from the office, the research lab, the library and the archive. This borrowing - or re-use of existing forms - has resulted in the creation of an ambiguous institutional structure. The function of this institution is never clear, because it references such a diverse range of possible activities. It could be a government department, a

¹⁹ Ibid, p 14

²⁰ Ibid, p 18

²¹ Buchloh, Benjamin, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: from the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions', in *October*, Winter, 1990, p 140-143

research lab, an insurance office, a clearing house, a registration office or an archive. As the viewer navigates these scenarios, a new network of possible narratives about the connections between language, knowledge, information and subjectivity emerges. The strategy of postproduction has thus facilitated the creation of an atmosphere of searching, enquiry, ambiguity and tension, all core aims of the project.

The logic of installation

In addition to its links to conceptual art and to the theories of postproduction and relational aesthetics, my research has been significantly informed by the strategies of installation. As installation emerged hand in hand with conceptual art, the history and theory of both practices are intimately interconnected.

Installation harks back to almost exactly the same artists and movements that conceptual art does: Dada, Surrealism, the Situationist International, Fluxus, Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, and the Happenings and Events associated with Pop Art. Like conceptual art and performance, it began to emerge with particular force in the 1960s, its focus on the dematerialisation of the art object and lack of medium specificity offering a particularly strategic critique of modernism and the commodification of art. Installation was not painting and it was not sculpture - it was something else altogether, an art strategy based on ideas, process and content rather than form. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, installation's hybrid and plural nature and endless capacity to offer the viewer anything and everything as art, made it an ideal means for reflecting the diversity and complexity of contemporary culture, addressing issues such as feminism, identity, colonisation, marginalised cultures, the body and consumerism. From the 1990s

onwards, however, it is more difficult to reconcile installation in terms of context. Bourriaud's theories of relational aesthetics and postproduction offer a possible new theoretical framework for the practice of installation. However, as we have seen, Bourriaud's approach is characterised by its failure to acknowledge the important role of conceptual art in contemporary art practice.

Just as theorists have difficulty defining and categorising conceptual art, so too, have they struggled with the intrinsically paradoxical nature of installation. Often describing it through negation, critics argue that installation is indefinable because it is anti-object, lacks medium-specificity and is frequently dependent on the unique features of the particular site in which it is installed. Installation has thus been referred to as a disappearing act - with no clear parameters or physical qualities, it no longer exists once removed from the gallery.²² This inherent indefinability of installation in terms of form makes it difficult to grasp how it is what it is. Some critics have thus focussed on the etymology of the word, reducing installation to the act of placement or putting. This is both helpful and problematic. Certainly installation is about strategic placement but considered on its own, it reduces the complexities of installation to a single action that implies any arrangement of objects constitutes an installation. As Fereday points out, there is a distinct difference between an installation of rocks and a display that consists of rock art.²³ Installation is also discussed in terms of its theatrical qualities, its ability to tease the relationship between art and life and its plural rather than singular nature that enables it to embrace

²² As argued by Keith Broadfoot, Geczy and Genocchio, George Alexander and others in *What is installation? An anthology of writings on Australian installation art*. Sydney: Power Publications, 2001

²³ Fereday, Jeffrey, 'Installation's crisis of presentation', (from Agenda, January 1992) in Geczy, Adam and Genocchio, Benjamin (eds), *What is installation? An anthology of writings on Australian installation art*. Sydney: Power Publications, 2001, p 58

difference. Whilst acknowledging the importance of all these characteristics, I consider that the core feature of installation is its ability to activate the relationship between viewer, work and space.

Installation, rather than displaying a discrete artefact for contemplation, offers the viewer something that resembles a staged scenario. This scenario, described by Michael Fried as theatrical, anticipates the viewer's presence. 'The work depends on the beholder, is incomplete without him, it has been waiting for him.'²⁴ Fried was highly critical of the tendency towards the theatrical in art, which he regarded as a negative feature of minimalism and a threat to the survival of modernism. Ironically, his theories now provide a framework often-quoted for understanding the relationship between viewer and work in installation. The nature of that relationship, however, has been explored and interpreted variously. O'Doherty speaks of an interaction characterised by objective distance - or even trespass. In reference to Segal's and Keinholz's work, he says, 'The spectator in the tableau somehow feels he shouldn't be there.'²⁵ Alex Potts describes an experience of displacement when negotiating video installation. He feels simultaneously drawn into and out of the work, an attraction and repulsion which he suggests reflects our attitude towards the spectacles of consumer society.²⁶ Fer parallels the experience of installation to two tableaux within Proust's *Remembrance of things past*: the subjective, inner world of all the bedrooms in which Proust slept and in which the subject is entrapped, and the other, more objective experience of standing outside houses or shops at night,

²⁴ Fried, Michael, *Art and Objecthood*. Chicago and London: UCP, 1998, p 163

²⁵ O'Doherty, *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*. Berkeley: UCP, 1999, p 49

²⁶ Potts, Alex, 'Installation and sculpture', *Oxford Art Journal on installation*, Vol 24, No 2, 2001, p 10

entranced by the illuminated world within.²⁷ Bourriaud, of course, sees the encounter between viewer and work as quintessential and, as discussed earlier, distinguishes recent art from modernism because of its lack of a preconceived idea about the relationship between viewer and object. He argues that the viewer can assume a range of roles, none of them necessarily predetermined by the artist.²⁸

The nature of the relationship within an installation activated between viewer, art and space is thus complex and varied. But whether that relationship is entrancing, alienating, ambiguous, social, interactive or all encompassing, it is arguably the pivotal feature of installation. Unlike the experience of contemplating a painting on a wall or a sculpture on a plinth, the viewer enters the space of an installation and becomes, in some way, part of the scenario the work has staged. I have thus logically employed installation in tandem with strategies associated with conceptual art, postproduction and relational aesthetics to create work that invites an experiential engagement with language and knowledge. While I have not been able to predetermine the exact nature of that experiential engagement, I have used installation to strategically direct the viewer through scenarios that evoke curiosity, enquiry, confusion and tension, ultimately leading to the experience of a subject caught in an anxious state of limbo.

²⁷ Fer, Briony, 'The somnambulist's story: installation and the tableau', *Oxford Art Journal on installation*, 2001, p 79-80.

²⁸ Simpson, Bennett, 'Public relations: Bennett Simpson talks with Nicolas Bourriaud', *Artforum* (USA) Vol 39, April 2001, p 47-48

The move away from philosophy

The subject matter of this project - as opposed to the practices and strategies used to realise it - has been significantly influenced by a post-structural view of the relationships between language, knowledge and the subject. The writings of theorists such as Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Deleuze and Guattari, and, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, have thus played an important role in the research. From the 1970s onwards, and in particular in the 1980s, an engagement with post-structural theory was almost mandatory for anyone serious about contemporary art. However, from the early 1990s on, there was a distinct move away from what some have considered obscure 'theoretical baggage'.²⁹ Nikos Papastergiadis says *'there was a collective sigh of relief when the new art announced itself as purged from theoretical pretensions.'* This new art, exemplified by the exuberant and more spontaneous conceptual projects of 'Young British Artists' such as Douglas Gordon, Tracey Emin and Mark Wallinger, and 'relational' artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, was now focussed on popular culture and the everyday rather than the lofty and difficult terrains of philosophy. However, as Papastergiadis also points out, contemporary art's debate with philosophy, psychoanalysis and politics was perhaps too easily dismissed - art is always situated within a social history - there is no exit from the past.³⁰ And, just as a reference to philosophy does not ensure the production of a profoundly insightful art, nor does an anti-philosophical approach mean that the art will be more engaging or socially relevant.

²⁹ Papastergiadis, Nikos, 'Everything that surrounds: art politics and the everyday', in *Everyday: 11th Biennale of Sydney 1998*. Sydney: Biennale of Sydney Ltd and the authors, c1998, p 21

³⁰ Ibid, p 22

Artists associated with contemporary conceptualism continue to make work that reflects post-structural concerns. For example, Michael Landy's systematic destruction of all his possessions in *Breakdown*, powerfully and disturbingly evokes the idea of a fractured, capitalist subjectivity with a questionable core of being, and Mark Wallinger's sign-written shop window declaration, *Mark Wallinger is innocent*, addresses the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Although these artists may not directly reference post-structuralism in their writings, its impact is nevertheless evident in their work through its focus on the fragmented subject and a search for meaning.



Figure 7: Mark Wallinger, *Mark Wallinger is innocent*, 1997

I have persisted with referencing post-structural theory because it provides a necessary historical as well as philosophical context for the project. Our understanding today of the nature of language, knowledge, subjectivity, power and truth is unquestionably indebted to French thinkers. The work of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Barthes, Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous among others, deconstructed the master narratives associated with modernism and a humanist view of the world, exposing that there is not one truth, but many; not one subject, but a range of subjectivities. It showed that that meaning could never be fixed because language was based on a system of signs and signifiers that are arbitrarily, rather than consistently

linked. It played a significant role in empowering the feminist movement, enabling it to explore the construction of a feminine subjectivity through the patriarchal structure of language. And it provided an equally powerful footing for marginalised cultural groups to analyse colonial discourse and issues associated with being 'other'. In the art world, as already discussed, it was accompanied by a flurry of experimentation with new strategies such as installation and performance that challenged and questioned what art could be and how it should be experienced while, at the same time, undermining the institutional structures of museums, galleries and art schools. Of course, the installations, site-specific work and performances of thirty years ago could not have been possible without the adoption of a post-structural and postmodern way of thinking about the world.

I have thus been unable to ignore post-structuralism. However, I have not intended to return to the murky theoretical waters referred to by Papastergiadis. I have been informed by certain philosophical views, but I have never set out to illustrate philosophy or demonstrate philosophical expertise in Foucauldian or other concepts. Rather, my aim has been to merge relevant aspects of post-structural thinking with literary, personal and other references in order to explore the relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity in a broad social and political context. Post-structural theory is thus one of a number of important references. Fiction has played an equal, if not more significant role. While post-structuralism has provided a basis for understanding the complex links between language, knowledge and culture, fiction has transferred that understanding to visual imagery that illustrates its effects on the individual. Fiction has paradoxically enabled me to make more real the links between my personal motivation and post-structural theory.

Central concepts, artists and strategies

This section provides a discussion of the core ideas the project aims to convey, drawing on theory, literature and personal experience to identify four core inter-related issues that underlie the relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity. Each of the works in the submission can be related back to one or more of the following themes: that language does not mirror reality; that the subject is in limbo; that the subject is complicit and that meaning is a network of incompleteness.

The discussion includes references to a range of art works that have explored similar ideas, though not always directly in relation to language or knowledge.

Language does not mirror reality

In Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, an elderly man named Mr Stillman has devoted his life to a strange and ultimately futile project. Every day he walks the streets of New York, collecting items that he obsessively renames on returning to his flat. Mr Stillman believes that the world is in fragments and that it is his job to put it back together again by developing a new language that will express the real essence of things:

Yes. A language that will at last say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words have remained the same. They have not adapted themselves to the new reality.

Hence, every time we try to speak, we speak falsely, distorting the very thing we are trying to represent. It's made a mess of everything.³¹

In George Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith earns his living by rewriting dated newspaper stories and documents to fit with the ever-changing policies and actions of the totalitarian government Ingsoc.

And in Richard Flanagan's *Gould's book of fish*, Billy Gould, an artist and con-man imprisoned on remote Sarah Island in the mid 1800s, is horrified when he discovers that the official prison records are complete fabrications of the truth. When he escapes the prison, he decides to take the records with him, dragging them on a huge sled through the rugged wilderness of south-west Tasmania. His aim is to expose the false records to the authorities - to show that the written word has unjustly represented reality.

Each of these scenarios reflects different aspects of the core premise of the project - that language, and the knowledge and information expressed through language, do not mirror reality. In the case of Mr Stillman, he knows that the word and the world are not one, yet persists in the ultimately futile task of trying to bring the two together. Billy Gould, on the other hand, struggles with the burden and weight of a history that fails to match his experience of reality, and Winston Smith knowingly constructs new versions of history. Each narrative is marked by a different degree of tension between the word and the world, exemplifying the complex and contingent nature of the relationships between language, knowledge, truth and reality. The scenes from these novels also illustrate the basic concepts of post-structuralism, which contend that language is the key site where social, cultural, political and individual meaning is

³¹ Auster, Paul. *City of Glass* in *The New York Trilogy*, London: Faber and Faber, 1987, p 77

located. Rather than *reflecting* the world and our subjective sense of being within it, post-structuralism argues that language *constructs* our individual consciousness and our understanding of the world. Knowledge, truth and the reality that we experience are thus *made* rather than found.³² Richard Rorty makes a clear distinction between the world 'out there' and the world constructed by humans through language.

Truth cannot be out there - cannot exist independently of the human mind - because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own - unaided by the describing activities of human beings - cannot.³³

Language is thus an essentially paradoxical system. It is the site of both truth and lies; it can both promise and deny meaning and it has the power to both shape and restrict our ideas about the world and our place within it. Further, because every language that exists is bound to a different culture or social system, there is no such thing as a universal language.³⁴ Meaning and truth are thus never fixed - they shift from culture to culture and from language to language. As a young child I was confused about when to use Latvian and when to use English, a decision seemingly governed by a set of unspoken rules. My problem was, of course, the result of a cultural confusion that stemmed from experiencing the intersection of two languages - I was caught between two different ways of thinking about and understanding the world.

³² Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, c 1989, p 7

³³ Ibid, p 5

³⁴ Kvale, Steinar, "Themes of postmodernity", in Anderson, Walter Truett, *The truth about the truth: deconfusing and re-constructing the postmodern world*, New York: Jeremy P Tarcher/Putnam Books, ©1995 p 21-22

The paradoxical and contingent nature of the relationships between language, knowledge, truth and reality has been explored by a range of artists from Surrealism onwards. I have been particularly interested in the strategic approaches of Joseph Kosuth, John Latham, Ann Hamilton and Christian Boltanski.

Joseph Kosuth's *One and three chairs*, 1965, provides a particularly clear example of early conceptual art's focus on questioning the nature of the system of signs and signifiers we use to describe and represent reality. The work is deceptively simple, consisting of a photograph of a chair, a definition of a chair from a dictionary, and a 'real' chair. The three elements are presented using a cool, objective style that seems more scientific than artistic. It is, however, precisely this strategy that facilitates the intellectual challenge the work presents.³⁵ Clearly, the three versions of the chair belong together but, at the same time, their connection is marked by an underlying tension.



Figure 8: Joseph Kosuth, *One and three chairs*, 1965

The work exposes the arbitrary nature of the relationship between the object, its representation and the system of codes used to

³⁵ Despite Buchloh's contention that Kosuth failed conceptual art's mission.

describe it - in other words, it demonstrates that language and reality are not one - precisely the problem that Mr Stillman feels compelled to solve. In addition, of course, *One and three chairs*, questions the representational function of art. Where is the art? one may have asked back in 1965. With no evidence of the artist's individual hand and little to explore visually, the work challenges the visual aesthetics of modernism, presenting the viewer with a predominantly intellectual exercise. Today, the spare and minimal aesthetic of Kosuth's work has been employed by artists for quite different purposes. For example, Liam Gillick's intensely intellectual work explores the links between reality, fiction and utopia, while Angela Bulloch uses a similar aesthetic to create interactive installations that explore the systems that govern human behaviour. I have been interested in using the stark neutrality of a Kosuthian aesthetic to evoke an emotional as well as intellectual response from the viewer about the relationships between language, knowledge and reality.



Figure 9: Liam Gillick, *Wood way*, 2002

The paradoxical nature of our relationship to language is demonstrated in Kosuth's *Zero and not*, using a different strategy. Since 1985, the work has been presented site-specifically in various

locations around the world, its final site the Freud Museum in Vienna. The walls of the entire gallery, from floor to ceiling, are covered in perfectly spaced rows of text from Freud's writings. The words, however, are deliberately and mechanically struck through with straight black lines. The result is an environment in which the viewer is completely engulfed by information that both promises and denies meaning. On the one hand, the text of *Zero and not* is almost discernable but, on the other, its meaning has been denounced, as if its very structure has an inbuilt error. The work can, of course, be read in terms of psychoanalysis, exemplifying the Freudian idea of repression.³⁶

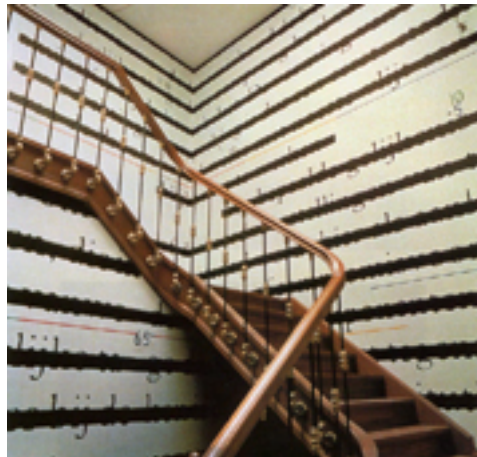


Figure 10: Joseph Kosuth, *Zero and not*, 1986

However, I have been more interested in the way the work evokes the overall paradoxes inherent in the structure of language and any knowledge conveyed through it. What is also significant is the way in which *Zero and not* provides the viewer with an *experience* about language on a physical as well as intellectual level, something not evident in work such as *One and three chairs*. The structure of language becomes inextricably associated with the architectural structure of the building.

³⁶ Godfrey, Tony, *Conceptual art*. London: Phaidon Press, 1998, p 358.

The strategy of erasing one level of meaning by replacing it with another symbolic structure is also evident in Ann Hamilton's complex, poetic yet spare works that often make reference to the paradoxical relationships between nature, culture and language. In *Untitled*, 1992, tiny pebbles are glued over the text within a book. As in Kosuth's *Zero and not*, the text is not quite readable. But, whereas Kosuth struck out his words with perfectly spaced thick black lines in a *mechanised* response to error, Hamilton uses the random shapes and colours of nature to conceal the content of her text. The rift between the language of culture and the language of nature is thus subtly but powerfully evoked.



Figure 11: Ann Hamilton, *Untitled* (detail), 1992

In the performance installation *tropos*, this theme is further explored through the act of systematically reading, then burning out the text in books using a hot buren. Meaning is both announced and destroyed, both claimed and denied. While I have not been concerned with drawing analogies between nature and culture, I have been influenced by the power of both Kosuth's and Hamilton's highly considered yet minimal ideas of palimpsest to evoke the gap between language and reality.

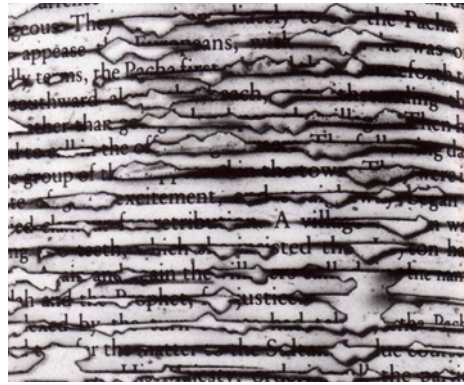


Figure 12 Ann Hamilton, *tropos* (detail), 1993

John Latham has been more aggressive in his approach to the relationship between language and the world. He works principally with books rather than text, aiming to challenge their materiality as well as their cultural content. In the 1960s he held *Skoob tower* ceremonies that involved burning or exploding towers of books created from encyclopaedias, old art texts and copies of *Punch*. These strange rituals, which attracted groups of curious onlookers, often climaxed with the arrival of firemen and police.³⁷



Figure 13: John Latham, *Skoob tower* ceremony, March 1966

Latham described the *Skoob towers* as negative or reverse sculptures, because they were about the collapse of an object rather

³⁷ Walker, John 'John Latham and the book: the convergence of art and physics', *Burlington Magazine*, November 1987, p 718

than its coming-into-being. He also said of the Skoob ceremonies: *'It was not in any degree a gesture of contempt for books or literature. What it did intend was to put the proposition into mind that perhaps the cultural base had been burnt out.'*³⁸ As with Kosuth, the work has a clear anti-modernist context, but beyond this, it uses a strange mixture of violence and humour to challenge the authority and wisdom represented by the book as a cultural object.

Christian Boltanski not only explores the tension between knowledge that is accessible and knowledge that is denied, but also introduces the idea of the unknown subject. He engages the viewer physically and emotionally in the untold narratives of countless unidentified lives by combining a number of simple, yet profoundly effective materials and strategies. These include emotive photographic imagery; cardboard storage boxes and biscuit tins that despite their anonymity bear obvious signs of aging and use; installation techniques that directly reference archival storage systems, and the overwhelming impact of the use of all these forms in multiple.



Figure 14: Christian Boltanski, *Réserve: Détective*, 1988

³⁸ Ibid, p 719

In *Réserve: Détective*, 1988, walls are lined with hundreds of stacked cardboard boxes of varying sizes that are labelled with handwritten dates and images of unidentified persons cut from the crime magazine *Détective*. The work implies that information about the unknown faces is contained within the boxes; however, while that information remains physically inaccessible, it is an imagined reality in the mind of the viewer.³⁹ The same strategy is used in *Réserve: Les Suisses mort*, 1990, in which tin boxes labelled with small photographs from Swiss obituaries are stacked in towers of varying sizes throughout the gallery, forming a forest-like maze of monuments to the dead.



Figure 15: Christian Boltanski, *Réserve, les Suisses mort*, 1990

Not only does the work both promise and deny access to information about hundreds of anonymous individuals, but it also creates an atmosphere of palpable physical tension. One can imagine the anxiety of negotiating an enclosed room of closely spaced towers that loom dangerously above one's head and threaten to collapse at any moment. I have been particularly interested in the power of Boltanski's maze-like arrangement of multiple materials, which facilitate a physical as well as psychological experience for

³⁹ In reality, the boxes contained unrelated newspaper clippings. Gumpert, Lyn, *Christian Boltanski*, Paris: Falmmarion, c1994, p 126.

the viewer. The work could be described as a type of postproduction, reusing and reconstructing existing archival material to enable the viewer to develop new relationships with familiar history. I have also been interested in Boltanski's powerful evocation of death. On one level, his work clearly addresses the death of countless individuals whose lives may have left no officially significant mark on society. But on another level, the work can also reference the death of the humanist idea of the subject, a death which was foretold by Foucault and Barthes in the 1960s.⁴⁰ The humanist idea of the subject assumes that the self has an essential and unique core of being; post-structuralism, on the other hand, demonstrates that subjectivity is fragmented and decentred.⁴¹

Boltanski also created a work called *The archives of C B 1965-1988*, which uses unlabelled tin boxes stacked against a wall to store his private papers.⁴² This personal monument has been of particular interest to the project because the submitted work also includes an archive of my personal records. While Boltanski's archive evokes his life through denying visual access to its contents,⁴³ mine seemingly reveals everything, from bank statements to birthday wishes, but paradoxically tells very little about who I am as a person.

⁴⁰ The idea of man is erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea the final page of Michel Foucault's *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences*, Bristol, Great Britain: Routledge, 1970, p387. In Roland Barthes essay, 'The death of the author', in *Image music text*, London: Fontana Press, 1977, he proposes that meaning resides with the reader, not with the author. The result is a focus on *how* the text is what it is, rather than on *who* wrote it.

⁴¹ This is discussed in further detail under the next theme, which focuses on the fragmented nature of subjectivity.

⁴² Held in the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.

⁴³ Of course, Boltanski's archive would be accessible to museum staff and researchers, however, as an exhibited artwork, viewer's are denied access to its contents.

During the course of the research, I have drawn on the strategies of all the discussed works, as well as references from literature, to evoke my own version of the idea that language does not mirror reality and both promises and denies meaning. I have been interested in the cool, objective approach of Joseph Kosuth's use of text; the power inherent in destruction in the work of Latham; the use of palimpsest and erasure by Ann Hamilton, and Boltanski's ability to overwhelm through the use of multiple archival forms. These strategies have been melded with imagery and ideas taken from fiction: the obsessiveness of Mr Stillman's futile language project, the burden of dragging a huge sled of false documents while escaping from prison, and the madness of constantly rejugling history.

The result is a series of scenarios that question and challenge how meaning is constructed through language. The *SECURE CONTENT* logo plays on the ambiguities inherent in everyday words, its meaning constantly shifting between verb and noun. The relentless stream of names that flash on the computer screen allude to thousands of lives but fail to provide any clue about their relationship to the institution that has recorded them. The booth, the room of shredded papers, the trolley of mysteriously coded shredded documents and the maze of ripped and mended books, all promise the exchange of information, but deny it at the same time. The idea of a language that can be understood by some and not others is further evoked through the strange images of black holes that appear repeatedly throughout the installations. Some of these are projected on the wall of a room that can't be entered; others line the walls of an observation and a research room, while others flash on a monitor in a sorting room where someone has been trying to piece together similar images from shredded documents. The black holes are a

coded language that promises to reveal meaning and significance but, like the black holes of the universe, ultimately remain unknowable.

The subject is in limbo

In Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*, the mutual interdependence of language, meaning and self is symbolically referenced through the protagonist's relationship to a huge quantity of books that have been left to Fogg by his uncle. He has few possessions, so he furnishes his apartment with the boxes of books that have been left to him. When he runs into financial difficulty, he gradually sells off the books. As the books and boxes disappear, not only does Fogg's flat become progressively empty, but he himself becomes physically thinner and weaker:

The room was a machine that measured my condition: how much of me remained, how much of me was no longer there. I was both perpetrator and witness, both actor and audience in a theater of one. I could follow the progress of my own dismemberment. Piece by piece I could watch myself disappear. ⁴⁴

Fogg's sense of self thus vanishes in direct proportion to the number of books left in his apartment, metaphorically illustrating the post-structural idea that our sense of self, like reality, is constructed through language. Foucault explains this construction through the concept of discourses, which can be understood as 'language in action'. ⁴⁵ A discourse provides a set of rules for subjects to interact with each other and the world. The institutions of government, education, the media, the church, the family and the law, for

⁴⁴ Auster, Paul, *Moon Palace*, New York: Penguin, 1989, p 24

⁴⁵ Donaher, Geoff, Schirato, Tony and Webb, Jen, *Understanding Foucault*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2000 p 31

example, each have their own forms of discourse which demand specific modes of interaction and being - the language rules of the game, so to speak. In a post-structural view of the world, the subject only gains meaning through these language games or discourses rather than through himself or herself. Indeed, there is no essential, true or free self - there is only a web of discourses, and thus of different subjectivities, expressed through language within specific institutions, be they social, cultural, political or whatever.⁴⁶

The idea of a fragmented subjectivity that has no essential core of being is in direct opposition to the humanist idea of the subject, which Chris Weedon summarises as follows:

Liberal humanism, which is still the dominant discourse in Western societies, assumes the unitary nature of the subject and conscious subjectivity. It insists on establishing the appearance of unity from moments of subjectivity which are often contradictory. To be inconsistent in our society is to be unstable.⁴⁷

Weedon thus identifies a tension that exists between a post-structural and a humanist view of the subject. The submitted work also reflects this tension. On the one hand, I have adopted an essentially post-structural approach that agrees that the subject is constructed through language, but on the other, I have struggled with the loss of essential meaning that accompanies the idea of a totally constructed subjectivity.⁴⁸ The submitted work evokes the idea of a subject in limbo, caught somewhere between a humanist idea of wholeness and a post-structural idea of fragmentation. This subject in limbo is unsure of where or how to find direction,

⁴⁶ Ibid p 116-7

⁴⁷ Weedon, Chris, *Feminist practice & poststructuralist theory*. (2nd ed) Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997, p 109

⁴⁸ As language is based on a system of arbitrary connections between signified and signifier, it is not possible to establish essential meaning.

nevertheless it is compelled to search for meaning and wholeness despite their seeming absence.

Alex Vander, the protagonist in John Banville's *Shroud*, constantly wrestles with this idea:

And yet ... For all my insistence, and to my secret shame, I admit that even I cannot entirely rid myself of the conviction of an enduring core of selfhood amid the welter of the world, a kernel immune to any gale that might pluck the leaves from the almond tree and make the sustaining branches swing and shake. ⁴⁹

McEvelley argues that this attitude reflects a typically Western inability to come to terms with the idea of a de-centred self. He claims that as we advance technologically, the self is undergoing great changes that provoke tremendous anxiety. Science and technology are revealing that our personalities may well be the result of a series of chemical and mechanical reactions, an idea that the Western mind finds difficult to accept. We still live in a world based on central authority, so we feel threatened by any suggestion that the self may be unimportant or non-existent. ⁵⁰ McEvelley suggests that in the East, people are much more able to readily accept the idea of a non-self because Eastern religions are based on a similar concept.

Foster identifies three different concepts of the subject, reflected in three different eras - the 1930s, the 1960s and the 1990s. The 1930s subject, founded in psychoanalysis, reflects an idea of self that is armoured against two types of 'otherness': that of repressed and unconscious desires associated with sexuality, and that of those who

⁴⁹ Banville, John, *Shroud*, London: Picador, 2002, p 27

⁵⁰ McEvelley, Roger, "'I am' is a vain thought" in Denson, Roger and McEvelley, Roger, *Capacity, History, the World and the self in contemporary art and criticism*, Amsterdam: OPA, ©1996, p 165

don't conform to the humanist ideal of the self, such as Jews, communists, gays and women. In the 1960s this idea of the subject was proclaimed a fake (by writers such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze), because it reflected a sense of unity and completeness associated only with one view of the world - that of a white, male, middleclass heterosexual. As Foster says, this now dead subject was a pretence. He then argues that in the 1990s the idea of the subject returned, but rather than being the fascistic, Lacanian subject of the 1930s, the new version is fragmented, hybrid, schizophrenic and expresses itself through trauma. Foster claims that all three versions of the subject are linked by one common feature - paranoia.⁵¹

These different, but related versions of the subject by McEvelley and Foster have been relevant to developing a deeper understanding of the complexities of contemporary subjectivity. The images drawn are difficult - one of a subject plagued by an underlying anxiety caused by the thought of the loss of the self, the other of a fragmented victim of paranoia that expresses itself through trauma. These are views of a broken subjectivity, one that may well recognise it has no centre yet is still seeking some sense of wholeness and repair. This subjectivity is reflected in the uncertainty of Alex Vander, the desperation of Mr Stillman, and the gradually disappearing Fogg, as well as harking back to the confusion associated with my culturally divided self as a child.

Michael Landy's *Breakdown* is an extraordinarily powerful example of the idea of a shattered subject seeking meaning outside the discourses of contemporary society. In February 2001, in a disused C&A store at Marble Arch in London, Landy destroyed absolutely

⁵¹ Foster, Hal, *The return of the real: the avant-garde at the end of the century*, MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, ©1996, p 208-212

everything he owned. He left nothing out – not even the most sentimental of items, such as the sheepskin coat his father had given him on a special occasion. Everything had to go - furniture, clothing, documents, photographs, gadgets, art works, books. Landy audited the lot, listing and describing every item and displaying the lists on the walls of the C&A Store where he spent two weeks reducing everything to crushed bags of unidentifiable shredded stuff.



Figure 16: Michael Landy, *Breakdown*, 2001

On one level, *Breakdown* is about the commodification of identity - it explores the extent to which we are defined by our possessions - but on another, it steers our attention to what is left when the stuff of everyday life is removed. It questions whether it is possible for the individual to exist outside the discourse of contemporary, capitalist culture. After *Breakdown*, Landy spent weeks reconstructing his identity by getting new copies of essential documents such as his birth certificate, passport and banking details as well as relying on friends to clothe, feed and house him.

Although my research is not specifically concerned with the impact of commercialism on identity, I am interested in the strategies Landy has used to question whether the subject can exist beyond the structures that normally provide meaning in our lives. Landy's highly organised process of destruction used in tandem with the

systematic and objective archiving of his possessions, reflects a melding of early conceptual art's aesthetic of administration with the ultimate in postproduction strategies.

The idea of a subject in limbo searching for meaning is powerfully exemplified in Mark Wallinger's *Prometheus*, 1999. The installation is constructed in such a way that the negotiation of the space becomes an essential component of the experience of being caught between two different states of being. *Prometheus* consists of a room within a room. The first, which is in relative darkness, forms a corridor that leads circuitously around the second. In each corner of this first room, positioned close to the ceiling, a video monitor shows a blindfolded, barefooted man (Wallinger himself) strapped into an electric chair. He is singing something indiscernible but spookily captivating in a high pitched voice. At sudden and unexpected intervals the video comes to a stop and reverses at high speed, giving the impression that Wallinger's body is receiving a series of electric shocks.



Figure 17: Mark Wallinger, *Prometheus* (detail), 1999

The experience is both mesmerising and appalling. The encounter in the central room is a complete contrast, disorienting the viewer with blazing fluorescent light and confusing perspective. Here, the viewer has moved into the position of God, looking down upon the

electric chair featured in the videos, which is protruding, life-sized, at a ninety-degree angle from the wall opposite. The walls on either side bear huge images of clenched fists, one tattooed with the word love, the other with the word hate. But the most disarming aspect of the experience is the huge metal coil that acts as a circular framing device for everything within the room. It emits an alarming electrical buzzing noise that can only be stopped if the viewer manipulates a circuit breaker. The work is exited through the darkened corridor.

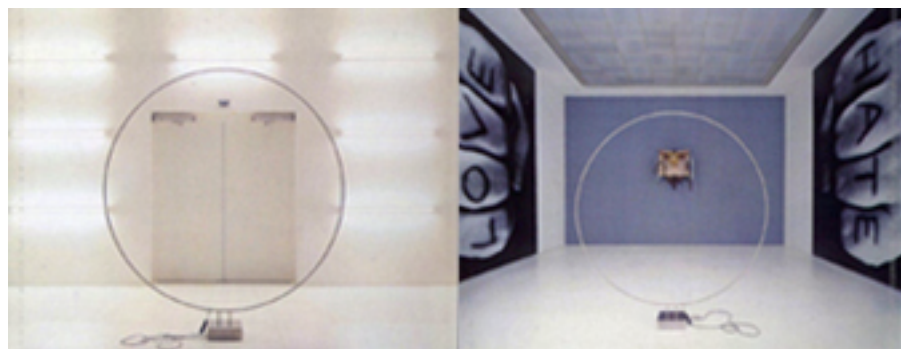


Figure 18: Mark Wallinger, *Prometheus* (installation views), 1999

The conceptual breadth of *Prometheus* is extraordinary, encompassing the grand themes of man and god, justice and fate, blind faith and innocence, power and impotence, good and evil. Of particular interest is the way in which Wallinger draws the viewer physically and psychologically into an experience marked by uncertainty, anxiety, shock and the ultimate absence of clear meaning. As soon as the corridor has been entered, the viewer has unwittingly become a player in Wallinger's game, absolutely anticipated and required to complete the course ahead. The viewer moves between two states of being: between darkness and light; between a narrow corridor that evokes the four corners of the earth and the blind faith of innocence, and a central core of power and control, where the world is literally turned upside down and good and evil are indistinguishable. The viewer is made to look up and then to look down; to walk in a circle and to stop the flow of power

emitted from the electric coil, seemingly playing with the very eye of God. The architecture of *Prometheus* leads the viewer on a physical journey that has no resting point and offers no clear resolution to the issues it raises. Either the viewer stays in the dark where ignorance may be bliss but is accompanied by the erratic hand of fate, or he stands in the light, where it is impossible to control the burden of ultimate knowledge. The impact of personally experiencing *Prometheus*, which is discussed further in Part III, had a profound impact on my understanding and use of strategies that manipulate the viewer's experience of engaging with a work.

Bruce Nauman's *Four corner piece*, 1971, provides an early example of conceptual art that uses similarly powerful yet even more minimal strategies to evoke the idea of a subject in limbo.



Figure 19: Bruce Nauman, *Four corner piece*, 1971

As in Wallinger's *Prometheus*, the viewer enters a four cornered corridor; however, Nauman's space is fairly brightly lit and rather than looking upwards, the viewer looks down, towards four television monitors positioned on the floor of the four corners of the maze. Unlike *Prometheus*, this maze has no centre - it endlessly repeats its own four corners. Each monitor projects one of the other

corners of the maze, creating a maze within a maze, as it were. As one navigates the space, the experience becomes an endless race to try and catch the image of oneself disappearing around the corner on the TV monitor. As Juliana Engberg aptly stated, 'The self is a fleeting thing - constantly eluding its own destination and its own sense of completion'.⁵²

Mike Nelson is another artist who successfully leads viewers into spaces that evoke the experience of disorientation and a loss of self-direction. His work for the 2001 Turner Prize in the Tate Gallery, *The cosmic legend of the Uroboros serpent*, could easily have been missed, its entrance marked only by the presence of a museum attendant standing near what appeared to be a staff door.



Figure 20: Mike Nelson, *The cosmic legend of the Uroboros serpent*, 2001 and, *The deliverance and the patience*, 2001

The door leads into a maze-like series of narrow, interconnected corridors that resemble the back spaces and storerooms of a large institution whose function remains unclear. The atmosphere is fairly dim and claustrophobic. Occasionally, there are signs of life - some tools left on a shelf, old newspapers, a thermos on a table. The

⁵² Engberg, Juliana, *The Labyrinthine effect*, Southbank, Vic: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2003, p [6]

experience of wandering through these spaces, not knowing where they might lead, evokes a mixture of curiosity, humour and a degree of tension, as if one has trespassed into private or secret property. After a number of false turns, the exit is found and the viewer is faced with the stark, open reality of the gallery proper. Nelson temporarily transports his audience into another world in which the blurring of fiction and reality is evoked through a physical and psychological *experience*. The viewer is literally in limbo, in a place where all sense of direction is lost.

As with Wallinger's *Prometheus*, Nelson's work demonstrates the powerful way in which installation strategies can evoke relational experiences. His installations are highly engineered despite their ramshackle appearance, inviting the viewer to imagine a range of possible narratives about the spaces he has created. These narratives, evoked through the re-use of carefully selected found materials, furniture, objects and architectural fittings that reference incidents from history, literature and film, are never quite resolved.

The idea of a fractured subject in limbo, searching for meaning and wholeness despite their seeming absence, has been achieved in the submitted work through referencing a combination of strategies used by Landy, Nelson, Nauman and Wallinger, as well as referencing imagery from fiction. The frequent use of destroyed, shredded, bandaged and partially reconstructed documents, book pages and images, evokes the idea of incompleteness and fragmentation. The storage of these language-based materials in plastic bags, numbered cardboard boxes and grain bags, suggests the idea of attempting to piece together fragments to recreate wholeness. In addition, the use of the maze as a strategy has been highly significant because of its ability to direct the viewer physically and psychologically through the *experience* of searching and attempting to find direction, as well as evoking a degree of tension and anxiety. As the viewer negotiates the maze-like network of scenarios on

offer, a general sense of unease is evoked, because it is never clear where one should go next. The visual realization of the maze is particularly indebted to the image of young Fogg's apartment, completely furnished with storage boxes of books that metaphorically represent his subjective self.

The subject is complicit

As we have seen, the relationships between language and subjectivity are complex and paradoxical, held together by discourses that lay down rules for the way in which we interact with the world. Foucault describes the way in which discourses operate and maintain their position within society:

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.⁵³

A discourse thus not only generates its own rules for interaction and belonging, it also concerns itself with the preservation of its institutional identity. To do this, each discourse has its own rules of exclusion, which are enforced through prohibition and rejection. As Foucault says, '*we know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, when we like or where we like...*'⁵⁴

It is not an easy task to assert one's identity and rally against exclusion in the face of powerful social discourses, such as that of the prison or the law. Billy Gould not only ends up destroying the sled of false records he attempted to bring to the authorities (who

⁵³ Foucault, Michel, *The archaeology of knowledge*, (trans by A M Sheridan Smith), New York: Tavistock Publications Limited, ©1972, p 216

⁵⁴ Ibid, p 216

would ever have believed a runaway prisoner's side of the story anyway) but also destroys himself. Similarly, in Kafka's *The Trial*, Joseph K's attempts to understand the workings of the justice system and to absolve himself of an unidentified crime are completely futile. The nightmarish system that eventually puts him to death can't be traced back to any one source or centre of power. It consists, instead, of an extraordinary network of power relations and privileged information that spreads from law court to private living room and can never be successfully infiltrated, understood or overcome - knowledge and power are intimately interconnected. Joseph K is denied access to the information that might absolve him and thus walks compliantly to his death, knowing that there is no way out of the particular discourse in which he is trapped.

This idea of a system of power and control that can never be traced to a single source - that is a network instead of a hierarchy - has been of particular interest to the project. However, rather than portraying the individual as a mere puppet of a network of all-powerful discourses, the aim has been to question our complicity in those networks. Are we, knowingly or unknowingly, responsible for perpetuating the very systems that seemingly control our lives? Berger and Luckman contend that it is easy to forget that the very social institutions that appear to control us have actually been constructed and put into place by us. They claim, in *The dehumanized world*, that people generally view institutional order as something non-human and objective that exists outside themselves and thus they see their behaviours within that order as objective, rather than subjective. Instead of acknowledging that they are the producers of the institutions that structure their lives, people tend to

see themselves as the powerless products of those institutions.⁵⁵

They assume roles that enable them to disclaim responsibility, reflected in the use of statements such as: 'I have no choice in the matter. I have to act this way because of my position.'⁵⁶

One of the ways that such role-playing is enforced is through surveillance and its accompanying idea of self-monitored behaviour. We have already seen the way in which the language games associated with discourses and institutions regulate subjectivity - we behave and communicate differently depending on the specific context of social or cultural situations. This self-regulation is further enforced through the idea of the gaze of an ever-present but unseen authority, as exemplified in Jeremy Bentham's infamous panopticon prison. In a panopticon, all the prisoners can be observed from a central tower; however, while they are aware that they may be watched at any moment of the day or night, they are unable to see who watches or when. The result is that prisoners watch themselves, monitoring their own behaviour through the fear of being caught out by the unseen authority.

Foucault believes that Bentham's model of the panopticon is more important to society than Kant or Hegel because Bentham 'programmed, defined and described in the most exact manner the forms of power in which we live' through his model of the panopticon.⁵⁷ Foucault says:

⁵⁵ Berger, Peter L and Luckmann, Thomas, 'The dehumanized world', in Anderson, Walter Truett (ed), *The truth about the truth: de-confusing and re-constructing the postmodern world*. New York: Jeremy P Tarcher/Putnam, ©1995, p 36-39

⁵⁶ Ibid, p 38

⁵⁷ Foucault, Michel, 'Truth and juridical forms' in Foucault, Michel (edited by James D Faubion), *Essential works of Foucault 1954-1985: power, volume 3*. London: Penguin Books, ©1994, p 58

The Panopticon is the utopia of a society and a type of power that is basically the society we are familiar with at present, a utopia that was actually realised. ... We live in a society where panopticism reigns.⁵⁸

The constant supervision that underlies the idea of panopticism results in the collection of knowledge about individuals that focuses on whether or not their behaviour conforms to the norm, rather than whether or not a specific incident occurred. Thus Winston Smith, in Orwell's *1984*, is constantly obsessed with what he can and cannot think or do. Smith knows that he may be observed at any time of the day by the unseen network of power that constitutes Big Brother. My reason for introducing surveillance into the submitted work is because it links directly to the idea that we are complicit in the systems that structure our lives. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, we monitor our self-construction through an unseen network of power that is paradoxically of our own creation. Surveillance and complicity are thus intimately connected. Further, because surveillance necessarily involves the collection and control of information and knowledge, it is inextricably associated with bureaucracy and institutionalisation.

In the installations of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, the impact of a bureaucracy gone mad is evoked through the creation of intensely detailed, constructed environments that incorporate an uncategorisable array of furniture, household items, office and hospital equipment, paintings, documents, drawings and text. In the proposal for *Monument to a lost civilization*, 38 existing installations are combined into one huge work that is dedicated to Soviet totalitarianism. Kabakov acknowledges, however, that the work is relevant to anyone from any society where man is forced to betray his true self. *Monument*, rather like Nelson's Turner Prize

⁵⁸ Ibid, p 58

entry, is accessed by chance, through a door within an art museum that promises to lead 'to the summer garden'. Once inside the labyrinth, the viewer navigates a complex series of halls, rooms and spaces, some only partially constructed, that make up seven different neighbourhoods including *The neighbourhood of communist ideology and propaganda*, *The world of bureaucracy*, *Hospitals and scientific research* and *Life in common*. The rooms form a claustrophobic maze of living and communal spaces that evoke the presence of fractured and desperate lives: the man who went crazy, undressed and ran off naked; the man who flew into space; the man who collects the opinions of others. When the final room is reached, promising access to the summer garden, it bears a 'Closed. No Entry' sign.



Figure 21: Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The big archive*, c1988

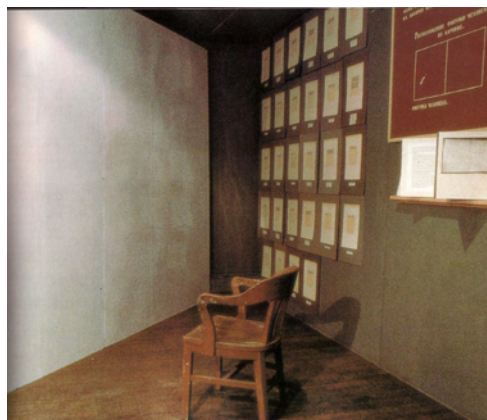


Figure 21: Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The man who flew into his picture*, 1988

Monument does more than just evoke the complicity of the subject. It promises and denies meaning as well as revealing the fragmented nature of the lives of the people it portrays. These individuals search for, create and find purpose through the most bizarre of methods: collecting and obsessively labelling detritus; living within a tiny, cupboard-sized space to find respite from the world; staring at a small dot on a large white wall, and, in what seems the ultimate but impossible solution, catapulting oneself into the sky through the ceiling. Our complicity in the social systems that drive individuals to such desperate acts is powerfully yet subtly evoked by the Kabakovs. Through the very act of navigating *Monument*, the viewer becomes both witness and voyeur. The cupboard that has become someone's haven is opened and their life is scrutinised; the gaps of the boarded up room of the man who flew into space are peeked through in a desire to take in every detail and, as if the viewer has become a spy, a torch is used to read the biography of the artist's mother and fragments of her son's thoughts.



Figure 22: Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *Mother and son*, c1988

Our fascination with the details of lives distorted through the communist political system seemingly takes place from an objective, outsider's viewpoint, yet the intimacy with which we take in Kabakov's scenarios makes us ever-conscious that this is a system in which we are complicit. Kabakov emphasised this in his proposal

for *Monument*:

It is equally clear that totalitarianism is not a political system of unknown origin which befell man: its 'germs' actually live and exist in each one of us and, for love of the future, this is a situation that can never be forgotten nor ignored.⁵⁹

The Kabakov's installations have been particularly inspirational, not only because of their ability to demonstrate our complicity in the social structures that govern our lives, but also because they so powerfully evoke the presence of the absent subject. Even though I have only experienced the work through models, drawings and documentation, I have been struck by its extraordinary sense of personal narrative and its ability to convey an inherent desire to find meaning and wholeness despite a social system that denies individuality. The particular strategies that facilitate these experiences are linked to postproduction and relational aesthetics. The Kabakovs use carefully selected existing objects and forms that reference life under a totalitarian regime to engage the viewer in new narratives about the nature of individual experience under such a regime. In addition, they employ the powerful structure of the maze to both confuse and entrap viewers in their network of scenarios that, like Nelson's installations, are never resolved.

The nature of our relationship to surveillance has been explored through Julia Scher's technologically sophisticated and complex installations. She is interested in our fascination with being watched and claims that 'there is such a thing as a desire to be supervised'.⁶⁰ This desire is ironically evoked in *Julia Sets I*, 1995, where large monitors and cameras are positioned at the four corners

⁵⁹ Bertola, Chiara and Falcone, Paolo (eds) *Ilya/Emilia Kabakov: Monument to a lost civilization*. Milan: Charta, ©1999, p 49

⁶⁰ Riemschneider, Burkhard and Grosenick, Uta, (eds) *Art at the turn of the millennium*, Koln: Taschen, [2000], p 446.

of a starkly lit unmade bed, the most intimate of personal spaces invaded by the prying eye of the camera lens.

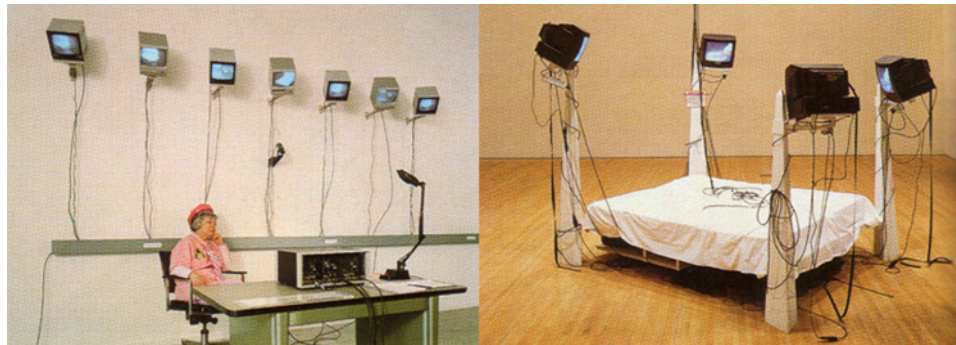


Figure 24 and 25: Julia Scher, *Security by Julia II*, 1989 & *Julia sets*, 1995

In another version of the bed installation, in which the space is dimly lit, the words **DON'T WORRY** are displayed on the monitors. Scher's cameras have been placed in other intimate sites, including the men's toilets of the Hamburg Kunstverein.

Sophie Calle adopts a more clandestine and subtle approach to the exploration of our ambiguous relationship to the idea of being watched. She personally takes on the role of spy, chambermaid or even stripper in order to try and piece together the narratives of others' lives. Her work is frequently exhibited as documentation in the form of surreptitiously taken photographs juxtaposed with her personal diaristic observations. It is her willingness to expose her own life in the process that I find so interesting, a strategy also adopted by Kabakov in *Monument*, in the scenario where the viewer uses a torch to read the artist's personal thoughts alongside his mother's biography. Bruce Nauman's *Four corners*, discussed earlier, also addresses the idea of our fascination for watching and being watched, cleverly engaging the viewer in an endless chase for his or her own image.

Dan Graham also uses techniques that reference surveillance and raise the question, who is watching whom? In *Opposing mirrors and*

video monitors on time delay, 1974, two video cameras and monitors are set up in front of opposing mirrors. While the cameras record the reflections in the mirror in front of them, those images are replayed on the opposing monitors. In addition, the mirrors create an infinitely regressing view of the space and anyone within it so that as viewers engage with the work, their perception of where they are in relation to the mirrors, cameras and gallery space is completely confounded. The work not only challenges ideas about perception, but also provides the viewer with a powerful experience of simultaneously being both the observer and the observed. This idea of the viewer taking on the role of subject and object, is explored further in *Performance/Audience/Mirror*, 1975, a performance-based work that was recorded at Video Free America in San Francisco. Graham stands in front of a seated audience, a large mirrored wall behind him. He describes the audience as he sees it before turning around, facing the mirror and going through the same exercise, also describing himself in the process. Although seemingly simple, the work creates a complex experience about the relationships between subjectivity, objectivity and self-observation. While viewers see themselves reflected in the mirror, Graham's descriptions are delayed by the time it takes him to relate what he sees. His seemingly objective observations thus become subjective not only through time but also through language. Graham's mirror works use strategies associated with surveillance, yet their reductive simplicity evokes experiences about the nature of the self and self-monitored behaviour that extend far beyond surveillance. Although I only began to explore Graham's work towards the end of the project, its use of mirrors to convey subjective and objective experience is of particular contextual significance to the way in which I have constructed the observation rooms in the submitted work.

A range of artworks in combination with literature have been significant in the development of installations that explore the idea

that the subject is complicit in the systems that govern all aspects of social life. Scenarios from Kafka's *The trial* and Orwell's *1984* have been melded with the administrative and institutional aesthetic associated with Kosuth's early work. Furniture, objects and materials associated with information processing and surveillance have been used to create environments that challenge the viewers' comfort zone, disrupting their ideas about their own role in the systems that govern our lives. Viewers are invited to peek through the window of a locked door, to observe others through an observation mirror, and to rifle through the files of an open filing cabinet. However, in other scenarios, they are watched via hidden cameras or strategically placed mirrors. Viewers are thus never certain about whether or not they are being watched, a situation emphasised by the overall maze-like structure of the work. As the maze has no centre, there is no way of determining where ultimate authority lies.

Meaning is a network of incompleteness

The world of human aspiration is largely fictitious, and if we do not understand this we understand nothing about man. ⁶¹

The final theme the project has explored through literature, art and philosophy is concerned with the search for meaning. If the relationship between language and reality is arbitrary and the relationship between language and subjectivity is fractured, then the relationship between language, knowledge and truth is also marked by disunity. How then, is it possible to find meaning when there is no essential self, when language is based on a system of arbitrary structures and when the truth is not out there?

⁶¹ Becker, Ernest, 'The fragile fiction', in Anderson, Walter Truett, *The truth about the truth: deconfusing and re-constructing the postmodern world*, New York: Jeremy P Tarcher/Putnam Books, ©1995, p 34

Richard Rorty attempts to make meaninglessness intelligible.⁶² He contends that the only way meaning can be achieved is through a different approach to and, understanding of, language.

But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that **languages** are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences.⁶³

Rorty thus suggests that our ideas of truth and meaning are inextricably bound to a view of the world in which man is the centre of the universe and truth can be found if only we search hard enough. By abandoning the idea that language can ever encapsulate reality or describe the essential core of one's self, Rorty argues that it is possible to be liberated from the ultimately meaningless pursuit of truth.⁶⁴ Rather than seeing language as the site of paradox and endless reflexivity, Rorty ascribes to it the power for endlessly recreating the self. He believes that through narrative fiction, poetry and the use of irony, we are able to retell, redescribe and reinvent ourselves, over and over again. Meaning is thus not located outside language, but created within and through language. Fiction, rather than philosophy, thus becomes the most powerful means for understanding the nature of humanity and the world.⁶⁵ The subject may thus be in limbo, but it has the potential to develop an

⁶² Casey, M A, *Meaninglessness: the solutions of Nietzsche, Freud and Rorty*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, ©2002, p 84

⁶³ Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ©1989, p 7

⁶⁴ Casey, 2002, p 78-82

⁶⁵ Shusterman, Richard,
www.press.jhu.edu/books/hopkins_guide_to_literary_theory/, viewed on 23/03/04.

understanding of itself and to find some direction through the power of narrative fiction. As stories are told and retold, meaning becomes a network of endless possibilities. There is no closure, only the continual redescribing of the self and the world.

These ideas have been evoked through the creation of scenarios that involve the viewer in a range of possible narratives about the nature and function of an unidentified institution. Those scenarios have been developed through melding imagery and ideas evoked through reading Kafka, Flanagan, Auster, Orwell and Banville. However, Anna Funder's *Stasiland* has also played a significant role in developing ideas for the submitted work, providing compelling imagery that illustrates the idea of incompleteness and the human drive to search for meaning.

Stasiland is not a novel, but the stories as related by Funder about the way in which the secret police controlled the state and its individuals in the former East Germany, are stranger than fiction. A particularly significant scenario is located in the Stasi File Authority Office. The building houses a team of women and men, aptly named 'puzzlers', who are in the process of piecing together 15,000 bags of shredded and hand-ripped files, documents, photographs, index cards, tapes and films - information collected by the secret police about individuals who were constantly monitored by the state. The puzzlers work in ordinary offices, their desks and filing cabinets covered with partially reconstructed fragments of ripped and shredded documents. They work manually, without the use of computers, gradually and obsessively reconstructing the secret stories of how individual lives were controlled and manipulated.⁶⁶ Their task is driven by a determination to get to the truth, to find

⁶⁶ Funder, Anna, *Stasiland*. Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2002, p 262 - 269

meaning, yet, as Funder comments, it also seems a completely symbolic act that is unlikely ever to be completed. It would take the 40 staff working on the project 375 years to reconstruct the 15,000 sacks of shredded evidence.⁶⁷

On one level, the motivation behind this project stems from my personal desire to piece together and to understand the mysteries surrounding my cultural heritage, which was both distorted and shaped by the shadow of communism.⁶⁸ On another, much broader level, the work is concerned with the innate human drive to seek order and meaning, to piece together that which has been destroyed or denied in an attempt to find wholeness.

In developing strategies that evoke the idea of a search for meaning that is based on narrative and can never find closure, I have again turned to the work of Mike Nelson and the Kabakovs. Their installations resemble elaborately designed film sets that have been temporarily abandoned by actors and crew. Through the process of negotiating these sets, viewers are invited to imagine the stories of absent subjects. Those stories, however, are never clearly spelled out. Thus we never find out who works in Mike Nelson's maze-like storeroom at the back of the Tate, nor do we know the fate of the man who flew into space from within the Kabakovs' *Monument*. Clues are provided, but conclusions are always withheld.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p 269

⁶⁸ My parents came to Australia to escape a communist political system.

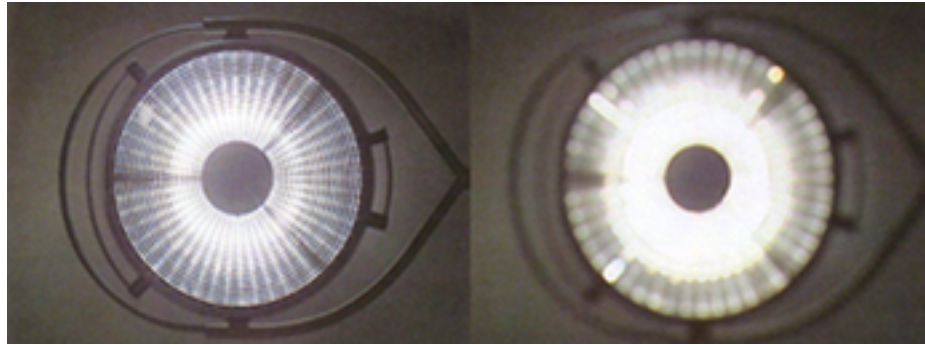


Figure 25: Mark Wallinger, *On an operating table*, 1998

Mark Wallinger's *On an operating table*, 1998, is an extraordinarily simple yet complex work that explores the search for meaning through language and religion. It consists of a single video projection of an operating table lamp, viewed from below, like a huge eye that looks down on its patient. Every now and then the lamp goes in and out of focus, as if the viewer were moving in and out of consciousness, or in and out of an awareness of self. The image is accompanied by a sound track of a diverse range of voices spelling out the following letters one by one without any special emphasis: I-N-T-H-E-B-E-G-I-N-N-I-N-G-W-A-S-T-H-E-W-O-R-D-A-N-D-T-H-E-W-O-R-D-W-A-S-W-I-T-H-G-O-D... And so it continues. The lack of emphasis on groups of letters demands that the viewer focus quite intently in order to make out the words. Concentration tends to flag, then return, echoing the alternate clarity and blurriness of the operating lamp. At a certain point, the message becomes evident, ironically demonstrating that language is both the source of meaning and the source of meaninglessness - words are created from a system that ultimately bears no relation to objective reality. Wallinger has the ability to make complex and insightful observations about cultural givens through the use of deceptively simple strategies. In a sense, he is master of the 'postproduced' cliché. He re-presents familiar imagery, ideas and texts in a way that provokes us to re-examine our ideas about everyday realities.

Lyndal Jones' *Prediction pieces*, 1981-1991, use performance as a strategy to engage the viewer with the idea that meaning can never be fixed. Carried out over a decade, the series of ten performances and installations explore the process of prediction, our relationship to chance and the cultural construction of identity. Read within its 1980s context, the suite of work has a clearly feminist undertone, challenging the idea that women are 'merely bearers of meaning' as opposed to 'agents for change'.⁶⁹ However, as Sue Cramer points out, the *Prediction pieces* resist specific interpretation, their meaning dependent on audience interaction at the time of each performance.⁷⁰ The works incorporate slide projections, sound, video, strategic use of repetition, and the frequent inclusion of text.

In *Prediction piece 1*, Jones sits at a desk typing and reading out weather forecasts as a series of images and texts are projected on the wall behind her. Another woman's voice reads out personal predictions from the Tarot, astrology and I Ching, while phrases such as *Watch this space* and *You see it before it happens*, appear amongst the projections.



Figure 27: Lyndal Jones, *Prediction piece 1*, 1981

⁶⁹ Cramer, Susan, 'An introduction to the prediction pieces', in *Lyndal Jones: the prediction pieces 1981-1991*, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001, p 9

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p 8

Jones continues typing, interweaving the various seen and heard texts into a single statement that is read to the audience at the end of the performance. Through the use of layered and repeated visual and aural metaphors, combined with performance, Jones has created an atmosphere of tension and expectation. Similar strategies are used in all of the predictions. *Prediction piece 10*, for example, explores ideas about the creative potential of both science and art through the layering of imagery, text and performance that references death, aging, science, time, the universe, Steven Hawking's theories, a broken cup, mathematical formulae, a magician, a tortoise and a grey rabbit.⁷¹ I have been drawn to the way in which Jones has used visual and aural palimpsests that suggest endless, layered possibilities for structuring meaning. Although the works are highly engineered, they also leave room for chance to effect their outcome, further emphasising the contingent nature of reality. In addition, Jones has adopted aesthetic elements from early conceptual art, such as the frequent use of text, typewriting and documentary style photography, to evoke a psychological response from the viewer.

Liam Gillick's installations combine the aesthetics of early conceptual art and minimalism with a range of cultural references to suggest narratives that often appear incomplete both conceptually and formally.⁷² In *Erasmus is late in Berlin drawing tables and information book*, 1996, everything seems unfinished. The walls of the gallery are only half-painted, the brush marks leaving a visually disturbing horizon line between the 'sky' of the gallery space and the art work itself. Coloured cardboard panels displaying collaged

⁷¹ These descriptions are based on images and text from the catalogue, *Lyndal Jones: the prediction pieces 1981-1991*, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001.

⁷² Riemschneider, Burkhard and Grosenick, Uta (eds) *Art at the turn of the millennium*, Koln: Taschen, ©1999, p 174

strips of incomplete information are pinned to the walls at varying heights, and tables display printed material as well as copies of Gillick's novel, *Erasmus is late*. Everything appears significant but nothing quite adds up, as if Gillick began with one idea but was constantly interrupted and diverted by others.



Figure 28: Liam Gillick, *Erasmus is late* in Berlin drawing tables, 1996 (foreground) and *Erasmus is late* in Berlin information room, 1996 (background)

Many of Gillick's installations paradoxically have the slick, polished look of futuristic office interiors, as in the maze-like coloured Plexiglas wall panels that dominate the survey of his work at Whitechapel Art Gallery in 2002, *Wood Way*. The panels are juxtaposed with large areas of vinyl wall text that displays fragments of Gillick's own writings. A strange atmosphere that blends architecture, graphic design and references to both the past and the future, is evoked. Gillick discusses the notion of Utopia as a central concern, using the term in the literal sense of the word, which means to be nowhere. The power of Gillick's work, which suggests a cool, slick world designed for perfect living, seems to lie in its reference to the total absence of human presence. Gillick's spaces truly are non-places - they not only evoke the idea of incomplete projects and narratives, but also the idea of being in limbo.



Figure 29: Liam Gillick, Wood way, 2002

The works discussed have illustrated a diverse range of strategies for conveying the idea that meaning is a network of incomplete possibilities. I have also adopted a combination of approaches to create a series of open-ended narratives about our relationship to language and knowledge. I have used the structure of a decentred maze for the overall layout of the work, suggesting the existence of further, inaccessible spaces. I have included recurring and multiple forms that promise significant meaning but remain indecipherable, such as the black holes and dots that recur throughout the installations as slide projections, acoustic tiling, video footage and partially reconstructed images. And I have created scenarios that invite the viewer to change roles, eg. from passive observer to active voyeur, so that he or she can never feel certain about what to expect next. The experience of engaging with the work is thus marked by a degree of tension and anxiety - the viewer has no clear direction and the scenarios fail to offer closure. And yet the work also invites searching and enquiry, suggesting that, through the layering of visual elements, there are possible ways of piecing together what happens within the institution that offers *SECURE CONTENT*. The viewer is thus encouraged to literally search for the subject of the work.

Summary

The project has melded a diverse range of strategies to develop a series of scenarios that explore the relationships between language, knowledge and subjectivity. The submitted work provides the experience of a subject that is fragmented, anxious and in limbo, caught somewhere between a humanist and a post-structural idea of the self. This subject is compelled to search for meaning and wholeness within an institutional structure of its own making in which knowledge and information are constantly promised yet always denied. The search for essential meaning thus becomes a meaningless task. Ultimately, we as subjects are presented with an endless network of possible narratives about our relationship to language and knowledge. There is no closure, only the continual process of redescribing the self and the world.